DESTINY 2 REVIEWED
CONSOLE EXCLUSIVE TO PC HIT?
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HAND OF FATE 2
HOME-GROWN RPG ACTION
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SINCE 1996
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CAN EGYPT BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO THE FRANCHISE?
Z370 MOTHERBOARDS
SHOULD YOU TAKE A DIP IN COFFEE LAKE?
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH BRENDAN GREENE OF
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PAX POX

The year continues its inexorable march towards Christmas and things continue to heat up in the world of games. As you'll see from the contents, we have a few games featured this issue, with five previews of upcoming titles and 11 reviews of some pretty goddamn big games, like Wolfenstein 2, Destiny 2, The Evil Within 2, Hand of Fate 2, South Park: The Fracture But Whole and Middle Earth: Shadow of War (both being the second game in the series) as well as some games that feature a different number after the title. It's tough trying to find enough hours in the day to play one good game let alone half a dozen or more.

In amongst the cavalcade of game there was, of course, Australia's biggest gaming show, PAX AUS. The indiecade is always my favourite part of the show. The level of talent on display never ceasex to astound me and each year I come away thinking that it has been the best showing of the Australian indie scene so far. This year was no different. I played some truly exceptional games from teams ranging in number from on to 25, and believe me when I say our developers definitely punch above their weight. Some of my favourites at the show included Dead Static Drive, Sky Noon, Rumu, Hand of Fate 2 (reviewed this issue), and a host more I can't currently recall due to the cold meds I am on. As per usual I contracted the deadly PAX pox, and by the time you read this I will be dead. Or better. One of the two. Probably better - I still have three magazines to complete before the office closes down in mid December.

Welcome to the issue - it's a big one and the second last issue of the year. We had fun putting it together and we're already hard at work on issue 269. Meghann will be doing her annual PAX indies roundup, highlighting the best the show had to offer, and in the tech section we are mixing things up and bringing on a couple of new tech writers. It's going to be a great cap on a good, albeait alarmingly short, year.

Daniel Wilks
Patient Zero
@drwilkenstein

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"He had pep and he was chirpy. He was pirpy"

"There is no I in bogan"

"Can nougat cause you harm?"

>PCPP #268

ON THE COVER

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

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We talk to the man behind the biggest game on Steam

REVIEW

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

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Punch all the Nazis

TECH

COFFEE LAKE AND Z370

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Is it time to upgrade, again?

TECH

SYNOLOGY DS718+ NAS

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One of the best just got even better

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Inbox

Original Sin 2 makes for good one-handed gaming, says Tim.

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! Letter of the month wins a copy of Hard West from Gambitious.

TBS AWESOMENESS

Dear Mr Wilks,

Kudos on the fine PC gaming mag. A letter to the editor below, for your consideration:

I'm loving this resurgence of turn-based strategy games. Once more, the TBS gamer is spoilt for choice – whether you prefer space civilisation destroying, a spot of general world conquering, brawling vikings, dwarves or alien sniping, it's all there, in pausable semi-statistical glory. It's like the '90s again. I had started to worry.

My current fave is Divinity: Original Sin 2. So much fun to be had mix/maxing, querying the plethora of abilities, forward planning strategy and tactics, all while chilling with a beer in hand. Try that while playing Witcher 3 or Squad.

Sure, most TBSs are a lonely existence, but as a father and husband this type of game is a godsend. The ability to continuously play for a few hours is rare, and to walk away for a sec and not lose your game, or that precious spot on the server is so damn handy when (RL) duty calls.

Just one more turn and I'll finish up for the night, head to bed. Maybe.

Cheers,

Tim Hosking

Hi Tim – the freedom offered in Divinity: Original Sin 2 is incredible, and on a nearly daily basis I'm amazed by the ways people have found to use the abilities given players to mess with the game, like teleporting bosses around maps so they fight each other, or killing Bishop Alexandar with his own giant self-portraits.

If you're looking for some great turn-based games, check out the Disgaea games on Steam. They may be ports of console games, but they are some of the finest, funny and incredibly deep turn-based strategy games out there. Valkyria Chronicles definitely deserves a look in as well.

CANS ON STRING

Hey Daniel,

I know Hyper doesn't have a feedback section anymore, but I thought I'd write you one anyway!

Firstly thanks for keeping the magazine going in these dark days for print media.

Despite getting my gaming news from the web, the only long form gaming media I can consume is still print.

It's great to see that guys like yourself, Malky, Ben, Wildgoose and Bennett are still around.

I still remember Bennett getting cross with me for leaking the Rome: Total War score from PC PowerPlay on the forums (Sorry mate, seemed cool at the time.)

Anyway, I have some feedback for you:

The subs section says Hyper has 18 years of history... try 24 by my count! Don't sell yourselves short!

The quarterly format is actually perfect for me as I'm old and don't have time to read a monthly magazine (especially as I have to read every word ... OCD style).

Also those quieter review months were always a bit of a slog.

That being said... I really miss the reviews! I get the theme format, but I really think there is a place for a quarterly mag that gets to bundle up 3 months worth of the best features, previews and reviews. Edge are now doing an annual and I think that is a really good example.

Lastly, you have to bring back the annual top 100. That was always my most anticipated issue (closely followed by the E3 issue).

Keep up the good work, hope you can do something special for the 25th anniversary next year. Get old mates Fish, Shea and Toose in for a nostalgia trip (*Does Mannerism*).

Cheers,

Brodie

Hi Brodie – I think you'll be happy with our next Hyper. I can't give it all away, but it's a book of lists, and the main one has 200 games in it. And yeah, we'll jump on that dating problem. The mag is definitely over 18.

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OCULUS & FACEBOOK BRING VR TO THE MASSES WITH THE NEW OCULUS GO

Oculus has announced their follow-up to the Oculus Rift - the Oculus Go. Unlike the Rift, the Oculus Go does not need to be plugged in to a computer, or have a smartphone dangling in front of your head. The Oculus Go a fully self-contained headset with Snapdragon 821 SoC inside, giving it the equivalent computing power of a mid-range smartphone. The Go also has integrated spatial audio, a 2560x1440 "fast-switch" LCD display and a remote control. Unlike the Rift, the untethered nature of the Go means that it doesn't have the same full tracking capabilities, which is to be expected at this price-point. Software wise, the Go is "binary compatible" with the Samsung Gear, so any apps that work on Gear, should work on the Go too. At US$199, the Oculus Go is clearly Facebook's attempt to bring VR to the masses. The Oculus Go will ship early 2018.

WESTERN DIGITAL USING MICROWAVES TO INCREASE HDD CAPACITIES

Western Digital has found a way to squeeze more capacity out of the venerable spinning platters of metal in a 3.5" package. Microwave-assisted magnetic recording (MAMR) is the fancy technology that WD has developed anc hopes will maintain HDDs cost-per-gigabyte lead over SSDs into the future by enabling drive capacities of up to 40TB by 2025. How MAMR works is deeply technical, but simply put, microwave fields generated by a spin torque oscillator in the drive's head allow writing of data at lower magnetic fields, meaning WD can pack more data on a platter than ever before. WD plan to get drives using this technology in production during 2019 and expects the drives not to be significantly more expensive than existing perpendicular magnetic recording drives. While SSDs may have the performance lead, HDDs will likely still be the more cost effective option to store bulk amounts of data for a while yet.

THE GIGABYTE AORUS X9 GAMING LAPTOP IS A BEAST WITH DUAL GTX1070 GPUS

Gigabyte's new AORUS X9 flagship gaming laptop is kitted out with an Intel i7-7820HK processor, two GTX 1070s in SLI, four DDR4 RAM slots for up to 64GB of DDR4-2400 memory and the choice of either a 17.3" 4K UHD IPS LCD or QHD 120 Hz WVA LCD if you prefer higher refresh rates over 4K. Rounding out the high end specs on the AORUS X9 is an ESS Sabre HiFi audio DAC, two speakers and two woofers, a mechanical keyboard, configurable RGB lighting all over the unit, and Killer DoubleShot Pro technology that improves network performance by sending important game data over Ethernet and offloading background and non-gaming stuff to the Wi-Fi network. Considering there are two GPUs in this thing, the AORUS X9 is relatively svelte at 1.18" thick at its peak. It's a heavy unit though, coming in at around 3.58kg.

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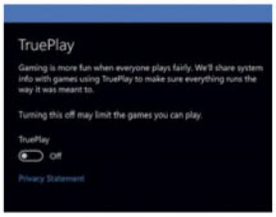
TruePlay
Gaming is more fun when everyone plays fairly. We'll share system info with games using TruePlay to make sure everything runs the way it was meant to.
Turning this off may limit the games you can play.
TruePlay
Off
Privacy Statement

Microsoft's massive Windows 10 Fall Creators Update has started rolling out and contained in the update is a new feature many gamers will find interesting - TruePlay. Mixed in with Game Mode, Mixer broadcasting, new help options, and greater hardware monitoring detail in Task Manager, TruePlay aims to prevent cheating in games developed for the Universal Windows Platform and distributed via the Microsoft Store. Microsoft explains that "a game enrolled in TruePlay will run in a protected process, which mitigates a class of common attacks" and similarly to Valve's VAC anti-cheating software, TruePlay collects data during game play and sends alerts to the game's developer when there's something out of the ordinary. TruePlay is disabled by default, but developers can require gamers to enable the anti-cheat engine for online play (where cheating makes the most impact) and allow users to retain full control when playing offline.

AMD DITCHES THE CROSSFIRE BRAND AS IT'S IRRELEVANT THANKS TO DX12

AMD will no longer refer to its multi-GPU support standard as CrossFire. The new name is simply mGPU, as in, multiple GPU. When asked why AMD is moving away from the CrossFire brand, AMD said that it is simply a branding decision not a technical one. Multi-GPU support is still a big part of AMD's feature set and its latest drivers enable multi-GPU support for the recently released Radeon RX Vega GPUs, bringing up to 80% more performance when a second GPU is added to the mix. A large part of AMD's re-branding of CrossFire is also due to the fact AMD and Nvidia no longer need to hand craft each game to work with CrossFire or SLI profiles, as DirectX 12 now allows the game developer to do this on their end. Seeing as CrossFire is now irrelevant, it makes sense for AMD to phase the brand out.

HUMBLE BUNDLE IS NOW AN IGN COMPANY

Once used to expose indie game developers and raise money for charity, Humble Bundle is now part of the IGN empire. Made popular off the back of its lack of DRM on downloaded games and a "pay what you like" pricing strategy, Humble Bundle has been struggling lately. Rival sites gaining momentum, attempts to become a game publisher themselves not going to plan and the sacking of over 150 staff have been a challenge Humble Bundle of late. It's no surprise when game review giant IGN, a subsidiary of publishing company Ziff Davis, comes knocking with a sack of cash, Humble Bundle take it simply to keep the lights on. Fans are slightly concerned that the Humble Bundle ethos will be eroded now that there's a big corporate at the helm, particularly since IGN have refused to comment on its plans for the site.

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MUSHROOM, MUSHROOM. SNAKE!

Bajo quits Good Game

After eleven years of being the strange, awkward and genuinely funny co-host of Good Game and Good Game Spawn Point, Stephen O'Donnell, better known to ABC reviewers has resigned, effective December, to start a career as a full time Twitch streamer. We reached out to Stephen for comment and he told us that the decision to move away from the ABC wasn't an easy one but it was a natural one. "When Good Game ended so suddenly at the start of the year, I knew I wanted to stay in the adult gaming space somehow. I have still been doing Spawn Point this year, our show for younger gamers, which I love and will miss SO much now that I've decided to leave to become a full time streamer. Basically I just gave Twitch a go and found I really enjoyed it."

"The more I streamed, the more I could see a real future in it for me. It wasn't until my supporters paid for my lease break fee, and moved me to the suburbs for NBN that I started to consider leaving the ABC."

"It's been such a joy man. I have never found a more wholesome chat room on the internet before."

"Basically, it would almost be offensive for me NOT to go full time, after the support I have been shown from my viewers. Is offensive the right word? Maybe impolite"

If you're interested in checking out the Bajo stream, you can find live streams and archived videos at go.twitch.tv/bajostream.

NOBODY WANTS VIRTUAL SPREADSHEETS

CCP dumps VR and closes studios

Word out of Iceland is that CCP, makers of Eve Online is shutting down a couple of offices in an effort to move away from VR development. Eve: Valkyrie was fairly successful but still failed to make much of an impact, and the developer recently released Eve: Valkyrie - Warzone, a non-VR version of the game in an attempt to find some market share and potentially recoup some losses. While the company says it is still definitely interested in the VR space, it doesn't look as though there will be any more VR development any time soon. The closures are estimated to affect around 1000 employees in Newcastle and Atlanta, though apparently many of them have been offered other jobs within the company.

CUTTING EDGE

Razer is making gaming phones now

So this came from out of nowhere, but it looks like Razer is expanding its market position to include premium, gamer focussed phones now. Launching November 17, the Razer Phone is quite the powerhouse, featuring a Snapdragon 835 octacore chip with a clock speed around 2.45GHz, 8Gb RAM and a 5.72", 1440p, 120Hz display and stereo front facing speakers with a THX certified DAC. COmpared to other phones in the same price range (around $700 USD) it's a ludicrously powerful games machine. To keep the price reasonable (for a premium phone at any rate), it looks as though Razer have skimped on some of the killer features you'd find in similarly priced phones - the cameras, for example are only eight and 12 megapixels on the front and back respectively, and there doesn't appear to be a fingerprint scanner.

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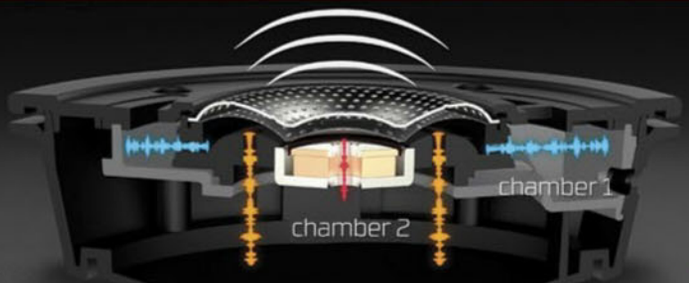

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THE AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS ARE COMING!

How do you determine what are the best PC products in a year? You could simply look at scores, or draw names out of a hat, but we have other plans. On the **22 March, 2018**, PC & Tech Authority, PC PowerPlay, Hyper and Atomic will host the first annual Australian PC Awards, an event that will see you, the readers determine the best products on the market. Starting **February 7, 2018** you, the most well informed, passionate and influential tech readers in Australia will have a chance to vote for the best products on the market.

Here's how it will work. The editorial teams of the nextmedia Technology and Gaming department will curate a list of nominees from the products we reviewed over 2017 as well as some of the products we may have missed. Once the nominees for all categories have been finalised, the awards will be opened up online for you to vote on. The votes will be collected until **February 28, 2018**, and the winners announced at a fabulous gala evening on **March 22nd in Sydney** – and you could win a spot there to have a grand night with us and the industry!

THE CATEGORIES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

MOTHERBOARDS

- Best motherboard company
- Best premium motherboard

VIDEO CARDS

- Best GPU company (AMD vs Nvidia!)
- Best OEM budget card
- Best OEM performance card

CPU

- Best CPU company (Intel vs AMD!)
- Best value CPU
- Best performance CPU

STORAGE

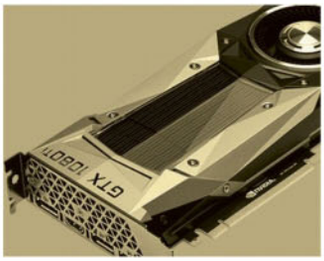
- Best HDD
- Best SATA SSD
- Best NVME SSD

NAS

- Best home NAS
- Best SOHO NAS

SYSTEMS

- Best laptop/convertible
- Best gaming laptop
- Best desktop PC builder



GAME

- Best PC game

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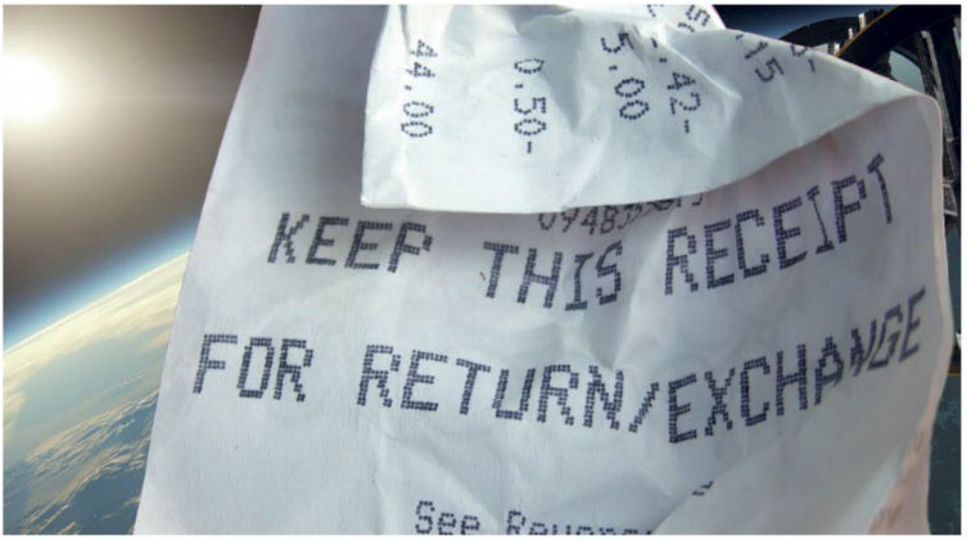
Star Citizen is beyond a joke. Yet for some reason, I can't stop laughing...



Star Citizen (the game) is still a long way off. But Star Citizen (the meta-game) is easily the hottest augmented reality experience of 2017. There are many exciting game modes, and millions of players. You can play as a Doubter, and scrounge through forums for nuggets of evidence that the project is in trouble. You can play as a Loyalist, and question the motivations of those who would dare to undermine Chris Roberts's vision.

You can play as a Whale, and donate towards the care and feeding of the large salaried workforce at Roberts Space Industries. The limited-time offers make this game mode particularly exciting, just like ALDI Special Buys. Except instead of paying AU$4.99 for a hammer, you pay US$850 for a .jpg of a spaceship.

Yet the most exciting character class of all is the Leaker – those who dare to show glimpses of the Star Citizen experience that haven't been polished for public consumption. For testing purposes, the Star Citizen community is divided into a distinct hierarchy, and test builds output elaborate water-marks over the gameplay video so that Leakers can be swiftly identified and excommunicated. So when a Leaker's video makes it on to YouTube the knowledge that this forbidden content could be DMCA'd at any moment makes every view positively electrifying.

Even simply playing as a Lurker can be a fun diversion. You can follow Derek Smart and Major Tom on Twitter, and dip your toe into a piping hot digital bathtub of internet drama.

It's been a wild ride these past six years, but alas, all good things must come to an end. Just as the servers for Hawken will be turned off forever early in 2018, the amazing Star Citizen Meta-Game could be winding up sooner than we thought.

An increasing number of Whales have decided that six years is long enough to wait for a video game, and they want to cash out. Lucky for them, not only is there is a Sub-Reddit for Star Citizen itself, there is a Sub-Reddit for Star Citizen Refunds. This friendly community has a handy guide on the small claims court procedure for getting your monies returned.

Yet there are reports coming through on this Sub-Reddit that RSI is now refusing refunds, and sending out form letters asserting that customers are 'outside of the statutory refund timeframe'. Perhaps more distressing was a dour screed from a SomethingAwful.com forum Leaker known as 'TheAgent', stating that refunds are now effectively impossible, because there are no monies left to refund.

> "dip your toe into a piping hot digital bathtub of internet drama"

"Stop trying to get refunds. Your money, that you gave us, is gone. It went to developing dreams; not yours, but the people in charge here. You paid for them to live out their dreams: Ben, who finally got to work with his idol; Sandi, who got back into acting; Chris who got to direct an absolutely stellar A-list cast. For everyone else, you've given them hundreds of thousands, if not millions, to pursue whatever they want to do. I'm sure they thank you for helping them do what they've only dared dreamed.

"The rest of us politely say 'Stop emailing us asking for your money back.' I know the official line is that everything is great and we are making money like crazy, but it's not. Things here are dire. They've been dire for awhile but you can feel the shame and terror every time you walk into the building. I know this is coming off harsh. I don't care. I'm sick of working here and I'm especially sick of the whiny emails I continue to get."

'TheAgent' goes on to strongly recommend Citizens flog off their virtual ships to any buyer they can find, no matter how big a haircut they take. The implication being that part of something is better than all of nothing. Is the leak real? 'TheAgent' has a fairly good track record, but there's no way to know for certain. He could be a genuine Leaker – or simply a LARPer.

It'll be a sad day when the Star Citizen Meta-Game finally winds down. Fortunately, there are other space quests to look forward to. Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III recently announced a direct sequel to Star Control II, dubbed Ghosts of the Precursors. Note that this is a completely separate project to Stardock's Star Control: Origins, due to enter Early Access any day now. Yes, there are not one, but TWO new Star Control projects in the pipeline. And I'd wager that both will be completed long before Star Citizen gets out of beta. PC

JAMES COTTEE is a dual class Doubter-Lurker in the Star Citizen Meta-Game and in real life.

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BLACK HOLE RISING

Nintendo has abandoned Advance Wars, but the fans won't let it die – and now a dream team of indie Japanese devs is creating a true spiritual successor. We talk to **HIROAKI YURA** about how Tiny Metal is set to blitz the old order of turn-based strategy...

WHO HIROAKI YURA
WHERE AREA 35
WHY TINY METAL

We recently had the chance to talk with Hiroaki Yura, the producer and director of Tiny Metal. Mr. Yura began by telling us of how the particulars of his upbringing set him on the path towards re-imagining Advance Wars for a modern audience. "I was born in Tokyo, but was brought up in Sydney since I was six, which makes me more Australian than anything else. I was groomed to be a concert violinist, but my interest always lay in the video game and animation industries which allowed my first foray into the soundtrack business.

"It all started with the founding of the Eminence Symphony Orchestra and the invitation of Nobuo Uematsu to Sydney in 2004, then the subsequent guests such as Hitoshi Sakimoto, Yoko Shimomura and many others. One thing led to another and I found myself in the middle of the video game soundtrack industry and working on titles such as Soulcalibur V, Diablo III, Valkyria Chronicles, and Xenoblade Chronicles. In that time, we also worked on large anime IPs such as The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumiya and Steins;Gate: The Movie – Load Region of Déjà Vu. This introduced me to Japan's top development staff and, thanks to my Australian upbringing, I naturally became friends with a lot of them."

From his discussion with these friends, Tiny Metal was born. "We felt that modern indie games were extremely impressive and we wanted to find ground where we could put all of our creative strengths to the test, without the AAA development stages we were so used to. When it's all said and done, we wanted to do something simple but effective and we all had the shared feeling that we missed Advance Wars. That's where it all started."

Yet despite their love for Advance Wars, Area 35 isn't simply setting out to create a clone. "Rather, we wanted to have our own twist and spin to it. We have several interesting new mechanics, most of which are designed to prevent pinning each other down and clogging up the map."

For instance, unit facing is now extremely important – hitting a unit from behind or the rear will increase the damage, along with the chance of a critical hit. There's also an elaborate fog of war system, and having units with good detection range is important to uncover larger areas of the map. "For example, having an infantry unit up on a hill increases their sight range compared to when they move on flat ground." Radar trucks will let you target enemies outside of visual range, and with the option of focus fire multiple units can combine their firepower in concentrated attacks. "Should the enemy unit survive the onslaught, they can only return fire at the unit that initiated the focus fire."

> "an age where advanced weapons are ancient weapons, it's technology lost during the time of the Great War"

Keeping units alive is worthwhile, as increasing their veterancy will increase their combat power. Then there's the Hero Units – unique, collectable units that you can find throughout the campaign missions. "The Hero Units are stronger than their regular counterparts, and may also come with extra weapons/parts. The Hero Units are called in from Comm Towers and can be deployed anywhere you have vision on the map. This creates a lot of tactical flexibility as you can call down a Hero Unit Riflemen or Commando and take over undefended facilities. Also, these units are capable of retaining their veterancy rank at the end of the battle, and can be brought from mission to mission where Hero units are available."

"The Hero Units themselves are based on all the ranges of units available from the factory, the only thing is they are superior in some way, and some units packing different kinds of weapons on them (like a Scout with an anti-aircraft missile system)."

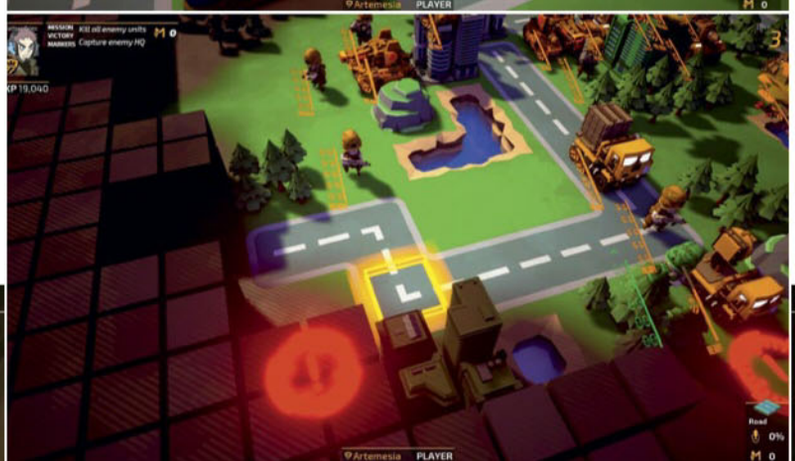
These new units all sound intriguing, but will we see any of the larger, more outlandish vehicles the Advance Wars series was known for – maybe the sort of over-the-top mega-tanks you'd see in a Valkyria Chronicles game? "Yes, you definitely will!"

It's an impressive suite of upgrades over the vanilla Advance Wars experience of yore, yet Mr. Yura told us that his team experimented with several other ideas that were ultimately shelved. "We actually had a system more similar to Final Fantasy Tactics where each unit had its own speed of recurring turns. Also we've had an overwatch-style mechanic where units could fire at enemy units that crossed their path as long as they didn't attack the turn before, but we scrapped it as it promoted camping and pinning each other down on both sides."

The setting at first glance may resemble the milieu of the Advance Wars games, somewhere between WWII and the present day, but the game is actually set in the distant future – a world of lost technology reminiscent of Battletech. "The world of Tiny Metal is a strange one. It's in the far future but the people live in an age where advanced weapons are ancient weapons, it's technology lost during the time of the Great War. So the people can create lower-tech weapons systems but are incapable of reproducing higher-tech weapons systems without access to the lost technology.

"It is a fun world to be working in, and the technologies allow us flexibility in the presentation, storytelling, and game/level design."

Tiny Metal is built with Unreal Engine 4. The choice to go with this technology, in part, led to a dramatic reduction in



the programming manpower needed. "Our one-man programming team Daniel Dressler made the decision. Before Daniel joined AREA 35, he was impressed by the engine's clean code and battle-tested feature set. Our artists and planners have also enjoyed using the powerful tools the Unreal Engine provides. Going into development based on my experience in the Japanese games industry, I expected we would need at least three or four programmers to complete Tiny Metal. In the end, we managed to get here with just Daniel as a full-time programmer. Even mid-way through development we were all thinking another full-time programmer would be needed, yet Daniel has managed despite that."

Recognising the value of their work, Epic Games has even given direct support to Area 35. "The Unreal Dev Grant has been a great help and is much appreciated. Epic Games' support was not just limited to the grant, they even sponsored our booth at PAX West 2017 and have provided a very generous support contract. Overall, choosing Unreal Engine 4 has been a boon for our project thanks to the engine, along with generous help and encouragement from Epic Games itself being a thankful plus."

Feedback from the PAX audience gave the team at Area 35 some valuable insights. "The biggest one was the readability issue we've had during PAX where several players noted that the Health Bars and Capture Bars were hard to read. I guess when one works on the game long enough, we don't realise the small things that much, but the feedback has really improved overall presentation of the game."

The soundtrack for Tiny Metal was composed by Mr. Tomoki Miyoshi, notable for his work on Soulcalibur V and I Am Setsuna. "Tomoki worked very hard to have a classic feel to the soundtrack. By classic, we don't really mean the classical music classic, but a classic soundtrack.

"We also wanted a proper Japanese soundtrack, so we went for a thematic-heavy style. Each character has their own melody. The main theme is influenced by Steve Jablonsky's Steamboy. Otherwise, we've changed the style of the composition to electronic for the Skirmish Missions to give a big change from the Campaign Missions."

One detail from the Tiny Metal launch trailer attracted a lot of attention: a positive quote from Yoko Taro, the creator of Nier: Automata. We had to know what connection Mr. Yura had to Mr. Yoko, and if there was any likelihood of future collaboration. "I consider Yoko a friend and his eccentric, yet down-to-earth character is a source of great enjoyment for me. Of course, I'd love to collaborate with him in the future given a suitable opportunity where we'd all benefit, but since he's a great "senpai" (senior) of mine, I'm not sure what I've got to give him in return."

A steady stream of post-launch upgrades are already in the pipeline. "We are planning downloadable campaign missions, more skirmish missions, a game mode that we can't talk about yet, and multiplayer! Personally, I'm looking forward to adding more characters and story to the campaign."

So what lies in the future of the Tiny Metal brand – maybe a Saturday morning cartoon? "Maybe! I'd love to see the characters come to life. The voice actors are fantastic and the story is solid. Teaching kids about conflict and resolutions, and the sadness of war without actual warring would be great."

Tiny Metal is due to launch on PC and console in the very near future. For more details, visit *TinyMetal.com*.

JAMES COTTEE PC

Cruel Fate

Why do people break stuff?

Can you believe I've been writing this column for ten years? If you've been reading it for that long, probably. I do tend to explore themes more than once, like how my Sims all lead terrible, optimal lives and how much I love games with snow. This month, however, I have a completely new angle. I've become fascinated with a game I've never played. It was recently removed from Steam, so I likely won't get a chance to. Yes, I could ask the developer for a copy but the most important feature would be missing. Also, there's an amazing twist and I know it already.

And so, I've started watching various people playing Moirai's eight suspenseful minutes on YouTube. I'm still a gamer if my primary interaction with games is thinking Markiplier has a lovely voice, right? But seriously, waiting for Let's Players to get to the "aha moment" is my everything. It's a tiny story, stripped down to a handful of compelling elements and characters, while relying heavily on game tropes to create a tense mood. The farming community is on edge. A woman has disappeared. Mysterious noises are coming from the mine.

Developer Chris Johnson, also known for melancholy puzzler, Expand, believes about half a million people played Moirai, which was free. It was removed from Steam because an attacker targeted it in a way that broke the game. Johnson was unable to access the time and resources needed to fix it and even engaged in dialogue with the attacker, which proved unproductive. This seems like a very small and malicious act, on the part of the attacker. There were also no options available for recourse through Steam, beyond a community ban.

I find it bizarre that people would try to shut down free games. Can one leave considered criticism or a bad review? Sure, why not? But actions which deliberately seek to hurt products and developers? In Moirai's case, something someone carefully made, maintained and didn't even charge for, was pointlessly destroyed.

I wonder whether something about Steam's community structure fosters viciousness. I find myself chatting happily with people about games in most online spaces, then putting on my Hat of Patience +1 if I venture over to discuss games there. Steam has guidelines for discussion, but generally gets developers to moderate their own forums. Perhaps it's simply prohibitive to moderate with a heavy hand, especially when lots of people come through to comment. Or, perhaps it really that people are just painful when anonymous.

> "the first thing I do in any RPG is walk to the end of its world, killing chickens"

I really would like you to go and experience Moirai's thought provoking structure alongside a Let's Player, as long as you're aware content has the potential to offend, so I don't want to spoil this. But, a "real world" feature to the game also relied on the community "not being a pain" more than most games. Johnson was able to collect data as to whether people were abusing the system, and up to half were, initially, more after the game was released on Steam. As well as the game's "aha" moment, my fascination really stems from this feature.

I've always been curious to know if there's something about digital games that inherently teach the player to be destructive, or do stuff just to see if you can. The first thing I do in any RPG is walk to the end of its world, killing chickens. Can you kill them? Do they yield meat? Not ever really having a proper Stranger Things childhood myself, I asked a bunch of boardgame geeks how they manage players who try to break stuff. The response was that, unless it's the point of the game, it's antisocial and people generally come together for fun, not anarchy.

So, what is my point? To suggest players need to log 100 analogue gaming hours before being allowed a Steam account? I began this column simply wanting to tell you about thought provoking game design, and ended up getting annoyed, partly because I like Chris Johnson a lot, and he's an interesting, Aussie designer. Without spoilers, on how design might have better supported community interaction, he does mention that, "A reminder of the game's conceit may have encouraged thoughtfulness. A small nudge could have gone a long way."

Moirai relied on the player being positive, curious and willing to engage, in an environment where a considerable percentage of players may be inclined to be antisocial and destructive. At the very least, Moirai deserved a better send off than being shut down by an individual who just wanted to prove they could break stuff. Johnson is philosophical about the experience and it enjoyed surprising success, in terms of player numbers. He concludes, "It was great to see the outpouring of support from fans after we took the game down." PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL, is an occasional troll, in case you didn't know. She once got a short ban from The Sims 2 forum for posting the all of the Simlish lyrics to a song that was stuck in her head.

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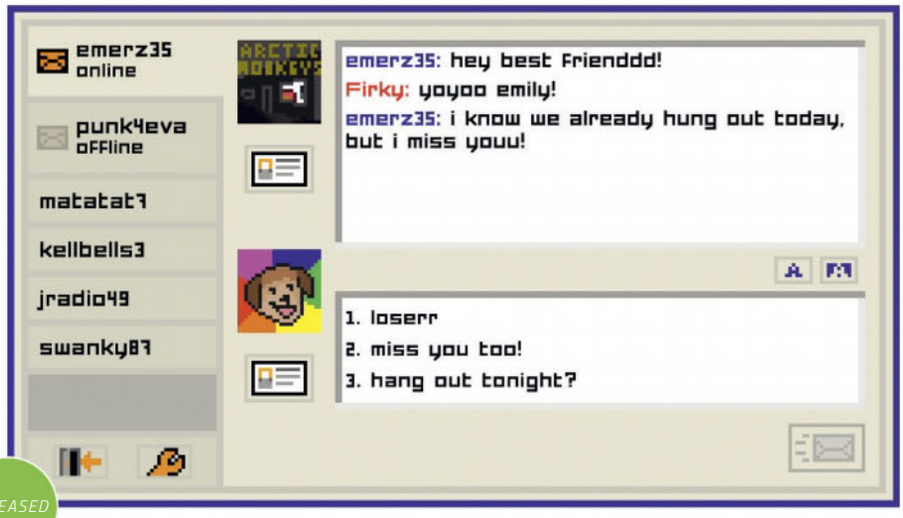
A Collection Aside

There's something quite personal about the connection between player and designer when they've mostly made their game solo. Like reading a novel, this intimacy lends itself to certain genres better than others, but always feels like a unique transaction. Or, if you need more socialisation, we know 100 cats who are ready to play. So, unstick the duct tape wallet from your pocket and find something that suits your taste and budget. **MEOWGHANN O'NEILL** needs a catnap.

EMILY IS AWAY, TOO

DEVELOPER KYLE SEELEY • **PRICE** $7
emilyisaway.com



RELEASED

Before writing this review, I wanted to go back and read what I had said about the first Emily is Away. These games are presented as a distinctive pair, but they left different ultimate impressions on me. On the original, I'd said, "I'd recommend Emily is Away to anyone who thinks they'll never live down some mortifying moment of their life." Emily is Away, Too is less about the cathartic exploration of embarrassment, instead asking you to navigate two difficult relationships from a position of vast immaturity. It's similar but not the same.

Last review, I told an embarrassing story about an awkward friendship. This time, I'll share the wisdom an old friend gave me when we were recently talking about how things, "went so stupid between us in High School." He said, "I think we just both needed to grow the hell up." And he didn't say "hell." I do agree. I finished Emily is Away, Too, feeling like Drew Barrymore in Never Been Kissed. I'm like, "Seriously, people, I know life feels extreme all the time, but this is a really small deal," while also knowing how much of a big deal I once made of small things.

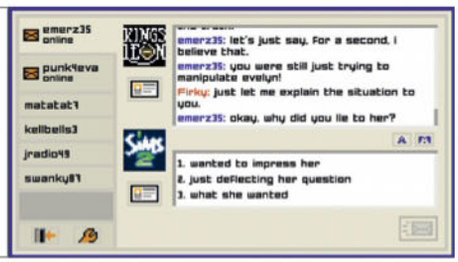
It's faithful to the teenage experience, for sure. The narrative is transparent enough for you to grimace at your own mistakes as you're making them, even if you can't yet predict their consequences. Set mostly in a messenger window, you receive text from two friends and choose from a list of paraphrased responses. By mashing your keyboard to type out something which is often similar, but not quite what you may have intended, there's a grudging agency to becoming a personality that, in my case, was more gregarious than me.

As in the first game, one friend is Emily. You already know each other and she'll treat you with some familiarity. She's the "good girl" who doesn't drink and has simple ideas about how she wants her future to pan out. Evelyn, however, is new and rebellious. It's a bit like trying to figure out whether to romance Aerie or Viconia in Baldur's Gate 2. Well, it was for me because I was actually just trying to be friends with everyone, regardless of alignment conflict that would get someone killed. Does the game assume you want romance? Yes, but it doesn't insist.

Another new addition is the characters linking you to Facenook and Youtoob, which pop up in your browser. Often, they want to show you their favourite songs, which become the game's soundtrack. Other times, they'll send images to your desktop. I had to clean them all off when I finished playing. There's also a point in chapter two where you notice your responses are on a timer. Not responding quickly enough means that the person you're chatting with gets angry at your lack of response, especially when they're saying something important.

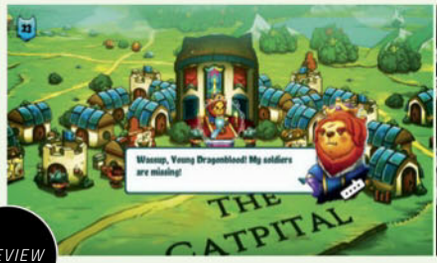
> "reminds me that I'm glad I didn't have the internet until I was 20. High school was hard enough"

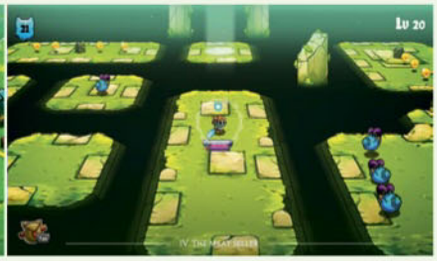
Emily is Away, Too reminds me that I'm glad I didn't have the internet until I was 20. High school was hard enough. So, if you think you can navigate friendship, romance, gossip and moral decision-making, while reading drunken spelling at speed, this may be for you. At the very least, it's an interesting, nostalgic take on both the visual novel genre and the idea that kids have no business dating each other. (I'm not actually prudish about these things. I'm just exhausted after getting all emotionally involved in stuff which won't matter in 20 years anyway.) Good game.


emerz35 online
punk4eva online
matatat7
kellbells3
jradio49
swanky87
emerz35: let's just say. For a second, I believe that.
emerz35: you were still just trying to manipulate evelyn!
Firky: just let me explain the situation to you.
emerz35: okay. why did you lie to her?
1. wanted to impress her
2. just deflecting her question
3. what she wanted

CAT QUEST

DEVELOPER THE GENTLEBROS • **PRICE** $15
thegentlebros.com/catquest





PREVIEW

You've got to be kitten me. Who asked for a cat-pun heavy Bastion-like? Was it you? If so, thanks! I did not know I wanted this. It's purrfect. I mean, purrlease, the cats say "pawsome" and the lions say "roarsome" as you solve their many side quests. In short, you're rescuing a snatched-away sister, but this tail also tells of your rise to power and the dragons who stand in your way, as well as a long purrcession of other genre cliches. There's also a surprising, and very delightful, twist at the ending, if you're feline up to beating the entire game.

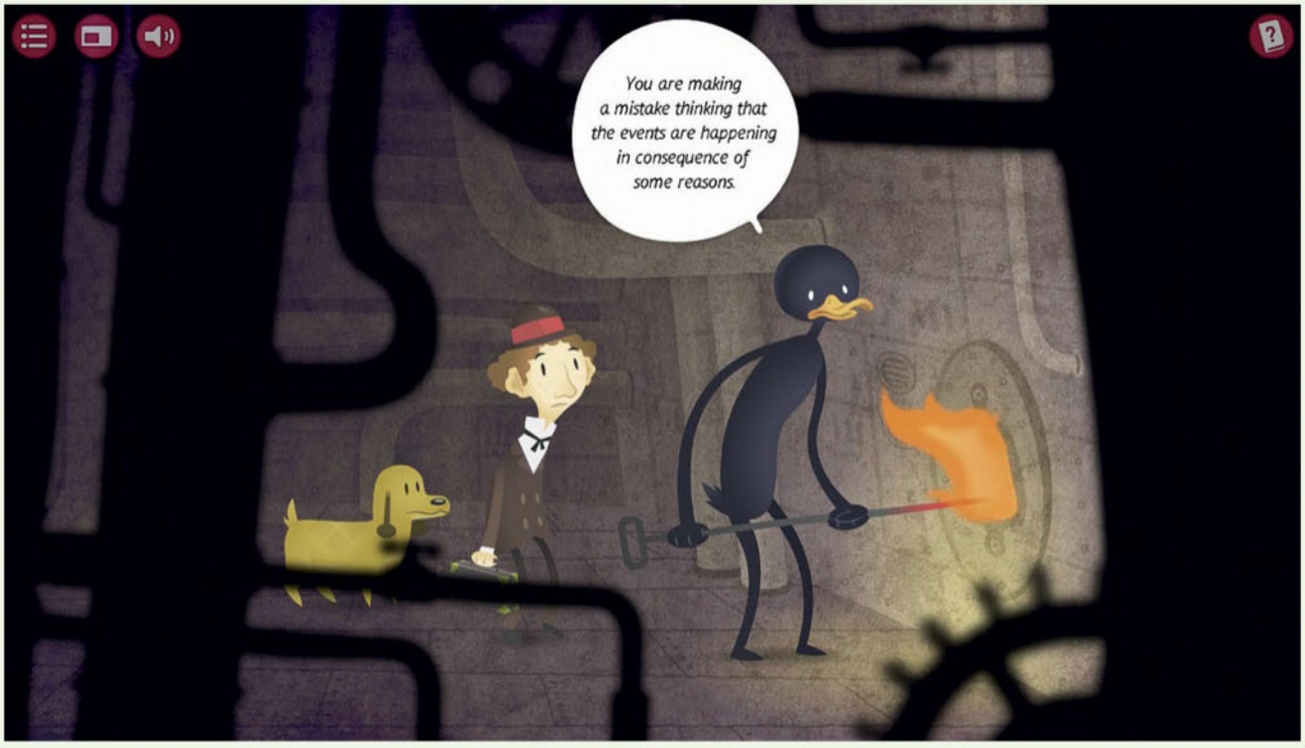
As an action RPG, gameplay combines melee attacks, which generate mana, with spellcasting. Spells are learned from the mage guilds that are scattered across an expansive, and incrementally harder to traverse, world. Observing monsters reveals the frequency, direction and range of their attacks. Even with full hit points, mana and armour, recharged by catnapping at save points, you can generally be hit less than three times by larger enemies in a dungeon at your level. Motivation not to die is created by having to return to the dungeon from a save point.

Some monsters hit vertically, horizontally or both, with ice which causes damage and slows you down. Fire usually happens in circles and causes ongoing damage. I personally loathed the spike traps, until I could cast them myself and lure enemies to stand on them. Other magical abilities, like healing, are less useful unless you specialise your character for magic, by equipping different combinations of weapons and armour. Experience adds points to all of your statistics, like hit points, and gold allows you to roll for different, perhaps better, gear.

Generally, learning to play well, and understanding abilities and timing, is a more effective path to success than micromanaging items, but adversaries get incrementally tougher as you progress, so do check the recommended level for dungeoneering. Monsters patrol the world map and even hide in bushes. Although the world is technically open, interlocking side quests encourage gradual expansion. Your progress is gated by high level fights and needing to cross water, both of which are eventually achieved after gaining a lot of levels.

Indeed, probably my only criticism is that the constant traveling between locations, as you complete quests, gets repetitious, especially when you have to skirt endlessly back and forth around the lake to complete one objective. It's very tongue in cheek, though. One mission has you following an arrow around and around in a tight little circle, like how cats stalk a small area before falling asleep on it. I was both frustrated and amused. And there's often the added impetus of a little romance or intrigue to keep you moving, at least.

I'd recommend Cat Quest for the chronic procrastinator. It's easy to clear a few dungeons, without needing to remember how to play. After a while, you've played enough of the same, so you quit until tomorrow. It's comforting, familiar and moreish, like how I imagine owning a cat would be, although without the responsibility of actually owning a cat. It's cute, funny and adventurous, also thanks to a clever soundtrack created by the game's mewsician. If you kept reading this review after the first paragraph, I'm pawsitive you'll enjoy it. (There are a lot of puns.)



THE FRANZ KAFKA VIDEOGAME

DEVELOPER DENIS GALANIN • **PRICE** $12
kafkagame.blogspot.com.au

Great games leave you wanting to know more about them and The Franz Kafka Videogame certainly piqued my interest. How did this early 20th century novelist's works, and process, come to influence a puzzle game? Was the purpose to retell his stories, or to imagine what kind of game Kafka might have made today? If you are familiar with Kafka, I imagine this experience will be a delight. To the less familiar, this is a surrealist stream of consciousness, where observing and manipulating the environment is closely linked to an unusual narrative.

I wanted to review this solely because the screenshots on Steam reminded me of visiting Salvador Dali's house in Spain, which is about the extent of my engagement with surrealism, except to say that I like surrealist painting. After playing, the designer, Denis Galanin, then linked me to his Gamasutra post titled Improvisational Game Design, which explains his belief that, "in any creative process, all the best ideas appear not before but in the course of work." As such, he used no design documents and allowed the content to evolve organically.

As a saxophonist, I love improvisation. Except in free jazz and similar musical forms, you certainly have a harmonic and temporal structure to work within, and will plan melodic material in advance. The joy, however, is when you unexpectedly create something new, inspired by the previous thing you've just finished creating. As I tell my students, "Play something. Play something related. Now play an answer to both things." This process also allows this game's story to feel very free, while still providing satisfying answers to narrative questions.

From the very first puzzle, where you're required to experiment and be observant, you'll also realise that your responses rely on an improvisatory approach to problem solving. Does this mean that you have to click on everything until something works? Surprisingly, no. Most puzzles have just a single element to solve, but you have to break context in ways that simultaneously make no sense and are completely sensible in the surrealist space. If you want the lock combination to be hidden under a carpet, forget it. Use your eyes and imagination, instead.

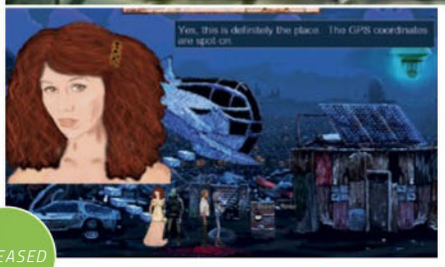
Indeed, I solved my favourite puzzle when I tried to imagine how Dali, with his melty clocks, would solve it. As I was attempting my solution I couldn't believe it would work, while concurrently knowing that it was absolutely going to. I can't remember having this experience in a puzzle game before, but you're taught that anything can happen. Grasshoppers wearing trenchcoats? In Kafka's time, dissonant layers of narrative could challenge the reader to find deeper meanings. How can designers challenge the players of videogames in a similar way?

In The Franz Kafka Videogame, Galanin found mechanical answers to this question, through thoughtful improvisation. Even the game's intermission raised a very common frustration, based on the implementation of content. If you want your game to make sense, play something else. If you want it to make a different kind of sense, I'd highly recommend this. It's short, unique and entirely coherent, once you know what you're doing. Since playing it, I'm also glad to have learned a few things about Franz Kafka, a creative and interesting individual.

RELEASED

NEOFEUD

DEVELOPER SILVER SPOOK GAMES • **PRICE** TBA
www.indiedb.com/games/neofeud



> a scruffy, ex-cop turned social worker, with a dodgy, high tech arm and coffee stained shirt

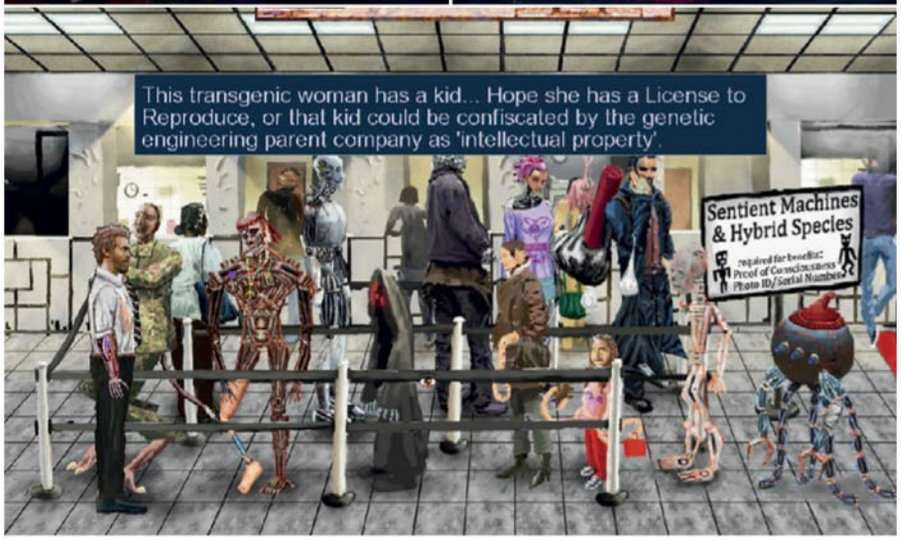
RELEASED

On an early date with my lovely, enduring partner, Ken, I did a terrible thing. We were seeing The Sixth Sense and I guessed the ending almost immediately. Then, I spoiled it. I know! It's amazing he didn't dump me on the spot. Correctly guessing endings is somehow what I do in all story-based media, so not knowing what will happen next is a relatively rare treat. In Neofeud's case, the combination of science fiction setting, detailed world and lengthy dialogue engaged me so thoroughly that I simply enjoyed the ride, without even considering the destination.

And, when things started to wrap up, after several hours of play, I realised that seemingly innocuous events at the outset were deeper than they had initially appeared. In fact, just when I thought there couldn't possibly be any more plot twists, there were three. The story goes to some dark and thought provoking places, which is especially interesting because you begin as just a scruffy, ex-cop turned social worker, with a dodgy, high tech arm and coffee stained shirt. Details, however, like a photo of an estranged family, have been carefully placed.

The world is similar to in Elysium or 3%, but where a neo-feudal dynasty explicitly rules over people and sentient AI, from floating palaces and futuristic boardrooms. My favourite part of the story involved traveling to a slum, where sentients had been recently fried for trying to access basic services, and then having examine the illegally modified house of a robot couple to determine if they should be allowed to keep their children. Characters range from mechanical art spiders and gangster robots, to annoying and/or well-meaning aristocracy.

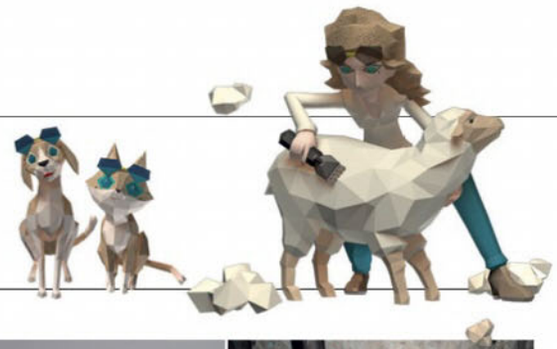
You'll even get to ride in a spacetime ship, which is a great catalyst for creating unusual story and mechanics. Unfolding linearly, as a series of scenes, the structure allows for an assortment of puzzles to be contained and the plot to move at a faster pace than in many adventures. Several scenes have action sequences, or a twist, at their conclusion, which serve as a reward for solving puzzles. Mechanically, the game works well overall, although I sometimes approached elements in the wrong order and then became confused about how to proceed.


This transgenic woman has a kid... Hope she has a License to Reproduce, or that kid could be confiscated by the genetic engineering parent company as 'intellectual property'.
Sentient Machines & Hybrid Species

The art is distinctive, colourful and evocative. I was amazed to realise that, voice acting for minor characters aside, almost everything was made by one developer, Christian Miller, including art, music, writing and programming. Occasionally, references to contemporary media confuse the setting, just because I hope that by the time my grandkids go to Martian boarding school, Twitter won't be something the world remembers. There is also some political/religious commentary that went over my head, without actually detracting from the story.

Neofeud is a massive effort from a solo developer. I'd recommend it to fans of the adventure genre, and people who can appreciate a detailed cyberpunk setting. It's a kind of Social Worker Quest, where departmental procedures include temporary fixes to your robot parts and your wallet is made out of duct tape. The setting allows story to transcend the daily grind with, for example, some of the privileged transferring their consciousness to komodo DNA infused clone bodies. In this game's world, there's a lot to surprise the player and I like that a lot. PC

10 to Watch

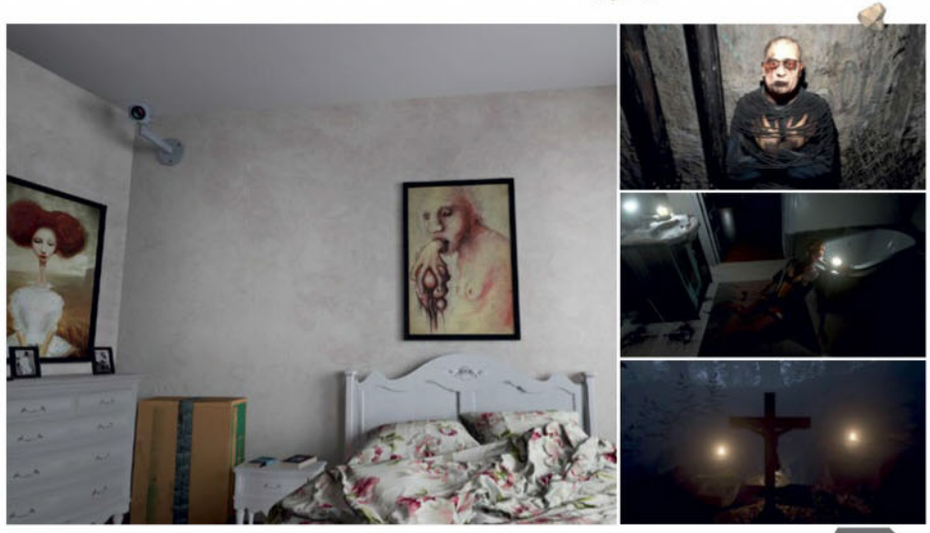


We. The Revolution

1

DEVELOPER POLYSLASH
PUBLISHER POLYSLASH
DUE 2018
we-the-revolution.com

▼ Paris is burning. The French Revolution is in full swing and you, an alcoholic and gambler who also happens to be a judge on the Revolutionary Tribunal, you stand in judgment over the people brought in front of you – criminals, revolutionaries and innocents alike. Peruse files, study evidence and sentence for justice or profit, but no matter how you decide it will influence the balance of power in Paris, and may lead to your head being on the block.



The Works of Mercy

2

DEVELOPER PENTACLE
PUBLISHER PLAYWAY S.A.
DUE 2017
www.theworksofmercy.com

▲ The Works of Mercy sees players stepping into the shoes of a very unlucky individual – his wife and daughter have been kidnapped by a mysterious assailant and his every move is being monitored on cameras placed around the house. To get his wife and child back, the protagonist must obey the commands of a voice on the phone, and that voice wants him to do some irredeemably horrible things. Will you kill for your family? Will you do worse?

3

Die Young

DEVELOPER INDIE GALA • **PUBLISHER** INDIE GALA • **DUE** 2018
URL: www.dieyoungnow.com

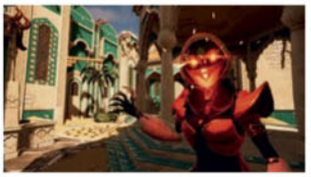
▲ Looking like something from the New French Extremity (the transgressive horror movement that spawned films like Inside, Haute Tension, Frontiere(s) and Demonlover), Die Young looks to be a terrifying trip to the brown trouser store. You, a young woman, have been kidnapped and left to starve to death in a hole somewhere on an unnamed Mediterranean island. Who took you? Why were you left to die? How do you get off the island?

4

City of Brass

DEVELOPER UPPERCUT GAMES • **PUBLISHER** UPPERCUT GAMES • **DUE** 2017
www.cityofbrass.com

▲ A cursed city plagued by ghosts, wraiths, animated skeletons and other monsters. A thief intent on stealing the precious treasures hidden within the city. Armed with a scimitar and a whip it's up to the player to fight, flip and swing through the city in a first-person Rogue-lite in search of treasure and a high score. Barter collected loot with genies for upgrades or, for added challenge, add a Divine Burden to a run, giving enemies new abilities and behaviours you have to deal with.

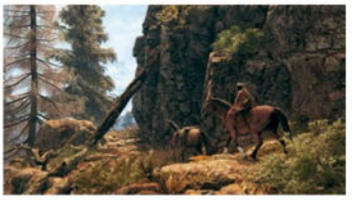


5

This Land is My Land

DEVELOPER GAME-LABS
PUBLISHER GAME-LABS
DUE 2018
www.thislandmyland.com

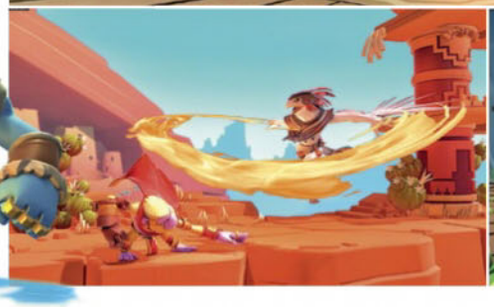
◀ We loves us some Westerns, so This Land is My Land definitely packs some serious potential – so long as the developers can steer clear of racial stereotypes and noble savage clichés. In the game players take the role of a young brave defending the land of his ancestors from the foreign invaders and settlers trying to take it. Settlements are randomly placed and grow at varying speed, so the brave will definitely have his hands full.

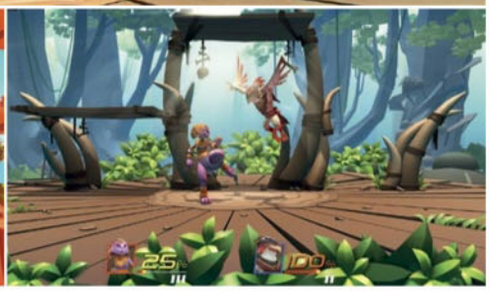


Brawlout

DEVELOPER ANGRY MOB GAMES
PUBLISHER ANGRY MOB GAMES
DUE MARCH 2018
www.brawlout.com

6





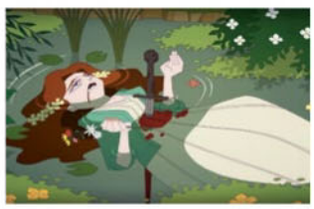
▲ A super aggressive platform fighter in the vein of Smash Bros., Brawlout does away with shielding and blocking, rewarding aggression rather than turtling. Did we say "in the vein" of Super Smash Bros.? We should have said very much like Super Smash Bros., but mostly made up of characters you have never heard of, with the possible exception of Hyper Light Drifter. It's based on an excellent foundation and looks good to boot, so we're keen.

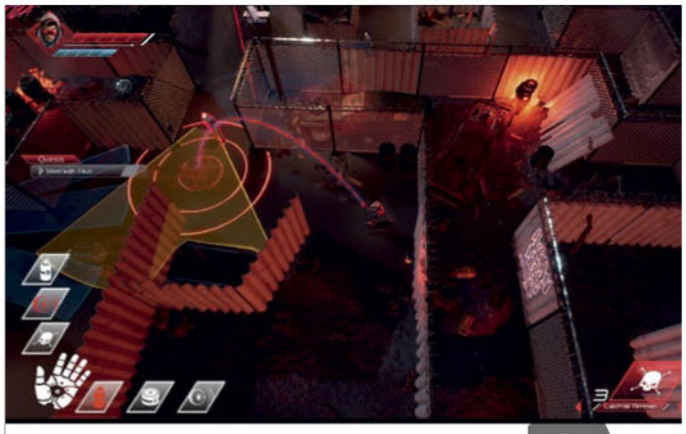
7

The Good Life

DEVELOPER WHITE OWLS • **PUBLISHER** TBA • **DUE** 2018
www.whiteowls.co.jp

▲ Rainy Woods is the "happiest place on Earth", and is the ultimate destination for Naomi, a reporter from New York trying to pay off her debts. Financial problems take a back-seat when she stumbles across the corpse of a young woman and subsequently discovers she can't leave the city. Who killed the young woman? Why does everyone in Rainy Woods turn into a cat when the sun goes down, and why don't they remember when the sun comes up?





8

Quantum Replica

DEVELOPER ON3D STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** 1C/CENEGA • **DUE** 2018
www.on3d.co

▲ Explore a vast cyberpunk city in this strange but alluring genre mash. Quantum Replica could best be described as a stealth based Hotline Miami/Ruiner by way of Metroidvania. Oh, there are time control powers as well. And what appear to be bullet-hell style boss battles. The stealth appears to be based more around speed and remaining unseen than moving slowly under cover – think Mark of the Ninja rather than Thief. With Metroidvania exploration, bullet-hell and time powers, of course.

Valnir Rok

DEVELOPER ENCURIO
PUBLISHER TBA
DUE 2018
www.valnir.net/en

9

We're a little sick of survival sandboxes, but this one sounds pretty rad. Players awaken on Valnir Island, a land not interested in your wellbeing. In addition to the wild animals and even wilder islanders, the island is also the home of mythical beasties intent on making you deader than dead. As a Viking warrior, you're capable of handling most threats head on, but it might be wiser to find some likeminded people and start a settlement.

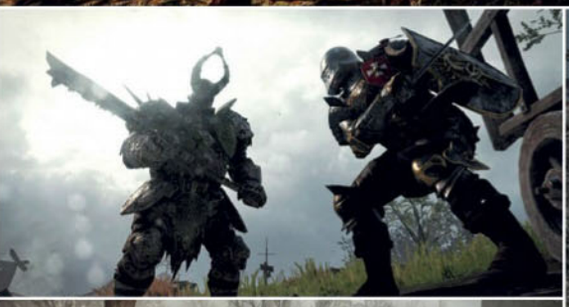
Bruce: The Game

DEVELOPER LOGIC ARTISTS • **PUBLISHER** IMGN.PRO • **DUE** 2018
logicartists.com

First announced in 2012, Bruce: The Game has had a tumultuous life so far. Original developer Tabasco Interactive (later renamed Orbital Knights) put the game on indefinite hiatus shortly after the initial announcement, but in 2016 the project was resurrected by Logic Arts. A side scrolling platformer, Bruce takes place in a Cyberpunk meets Sin City metropolis filled with danger, crime and gorgeous hand-drawn backgrounds.

10

eye candy



Warhammer: Vermintide 2

www.vermintide.com

Hunt
Showdown
www.huntshowdown.com

THERE IS ONLY **CHICKEN DINNER**

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds is already an online phenomenon, with millions of players dining-in during its Early Access release. **NATHAN LAWRENCE** 'chutes in to Pochinki with the dev behind the phenomenon, **Brendan "PlayerUnknown" Greene**, and scores more than a few chicken nuggets.

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

DEVELOPER BLUEHOLE STUDIO • **PUBLISHER** BLUEHOLE STUDIO • **DUE** 2017
playbattlegrounds.com

'Winner winner chicken dinner!' As far as victory phrases go, there are, arguably, none as sweet as PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) slogan popping up on your screen. Battlegrounds isn't even officially out yet and it's a runaway success, with more than 15 million Early Access copies sold (at the time of writing), and a game that continues to break its own concurrent users (CCU) records. PUBG's CCU on Steam has already obliterated Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, smashed Dota 2, and beaten itself multiple times in a meteoric climb to more than 2.2 million simultaneous players.

As far as the winning phrase is concerned, Greene has used it since helping to build and evolve the Battle Royale shooter subgenre with his Battle Royale mod for Arma 2. The mod and genre name are pulled from the 2000 Japanese cult film of the same name, which was used as the core inspiration for Greene's dabbling in the subgenre. According to Greene, Battlegrounds is the culmination of what he started with his Battle Royale mod for Arma 2.

For fans of chicken dinners, the good news is Greene hopes to support the game for years to come after the imminent 1.0 release. Read on to learn more about some of the secret ingredients of the delicious PUBG recipe, and the future tastes you can look forward to.

HELLO, ELO

Currently, PUBG takes skill into account when matchmaking, but not in a properly integrated way. According to Brendan Greene, he'd like to introduce a proper Elo rating system, which is a method for sorting players by relative skill levels for PvP games. He also talked about ranked servers, which should help to keep the post-launch newbies safer from the veteran sharks.

Accurately modeling gunshot audio is an ongoing priority for the development team.

New maps will also come with new weapons and vehicle types.

> there is no specific play style that you're forced to play. It's a shooter, but it's like playing a movie

SECRET HERBS AND SPICES

Battlegrounds is by no means an easy game. That said, conceptually, it's not that tricky to wrap your head around. You start in a plane with up to 99 other players, bail out over an island, parachute to a landing destination that's hopefully full of loot, then shift into an ever-shrinking circle with the goal of being the last player alive.

You don't even necessarily need to kill to win. It's a game where hiding in a bush is just as viable as actively seeking out fights. In fact, there's an argument that the avoidant player has a better chance of surviving than the frag-happy one, though it certainly helps to feel confident in your shooting when you come across other players. PUBG has a way of making the panic set in during firefights, where even veteran shooters can whiff the simplest shots.

While Greene isn't 100 per cent certain about the secret ingredients that mean players can't get enough of his game, he has a higher-level understanding of what makes it so appealing. "I thought we'd sell probably 5 million within the first year," admits Greene. "That was conservative sales. We thought we were going to do well, but not as well as we did. We've been trying to figure out why people enjoy the game so much.

"For me, we give players a lot of freedom. There's a very simple concept there. It's easy to understand. I think it's that draw that there are no real rules. You can play the game how you want to. You can drop at School and have Rocky moments with people: it's high action. But you can just drop and get away from people, and spend that first half of the match looting. There is no specific play style that you're forced to play. I think that's what draws people in: that freedom of play how you want to. It's a shooter game, but it's really like playing a movie."

POKER ODDS

It's easy to fixate on the various random-number-generator (RNG) systems that influence key parts of the Battlegrounds formula. There are, after all, some significant randomised elements. The plane's flight trajectory. The available (or, sometimes, unavailable) loot when you hit the ground. Then there's the circles: the white safe one, the life-sapping blue one, and the explosive red one. For a jaded and recently digitally deceased player, it's easy to overestimate the role that luck plays in PUBG, but Greene isn't having any of it.

"I keep hearing this about the RNG element," laments Greene. "While it is RNG, there are lots of limits there. The tournaments we've had and seen, and even on our leaderboards, you see the same players at the top. You see it's the good players always manage to have a good win rate, because they know how to play the game. On the pro scale, you'll see them, at the start, there is no real fighting. Everyone is trying to gear up, because the fighting happens when the blue zone happens.

"There is that understanding that there is a certain way to play the game if you want to consistently win. The RNG is there, but we're trying to tune it. We still want the RNG: having to deal with situations where you may not have exactly what you want or what you're comfortable with. That's part of the game."

One of the other randomised elements that players may not be fully aware of, though, is the recoil on fully automatic weapons. "Our lead gunplay designer didn't want recoil patterns," explains Greene. "Recoil patterns didn't really truly test the player because you really could learn a pattern, and even, to an extent, that you could macro them. What we have is a test of the player's reaction speeds. As the recoil goes up, certain weapons have a tendency to break left or break right at a certain distance."

The next time you spray and pray and wonder why that enemy player in front of you didn't die, this may be why.

CONTROVERSIAL KILLING

Because the ultimate reward of Battlegrounds is to be the last player standing, people are incentivised to win by any permitted means necessary. This doesn't include cheating, and while Bluehole frowns upon exploits (including the use of macros), there are some tactics that are hotly debated. This is where some of the controversial gameplay tactics creep in.

Despite the freedom of PUBG that lets players play as aggressively, as conservatively, or as cheaply as they like, there are still divisive player-dictated honour codes of what are and aren't acceptable tactics. One such divisive tactic is scoring kills from the blue zone on players who are in the white zone. For Greene, though, it's not at all controversial.

"There is only chicken dinner," says Greene. "These tactics, if you get shot from behind from the blue zone, then you weren't watching your back. This idea that just because you weren't watching your back or you weren't paying attention to a certain way that people play: is that our fault? No. The game is there to be played, and how you win or how you choose to play, that's up to you. I would never criticise someone's [tactics].

"I'm a camper. I will sit in bushes happily with no kills and try to win the game, but a lot of people hate me. They go, 'Bush Wookies are bad!' But that's the way I play. I come from sniping in video games; that's what I love to do. I will crouch in a bush, and that's me. That's how you play the game, and I think that's why it's successful because we don't tell you how to play the game. There is no correct way. You can have these slightly shady tactics. Yes, some people would think they are [cheap], but that's your call. That's the way you decide to play."

SOUNDS OF WAR

Like Rainbow Six Siege, the sound design in PUBG is unique and, more importantly,

CHICKEN DINNER NEWBIES

If you've yet to play PUBG, you're in for a shock. While easy to grasp conceptually, there's quite a steep learning curve. Brendan Greene acknowledges this and, post-launch, hopes to add training modes and a firing range. Before this happens, though. Try landing at School. It's a trial-by-fire drop site, but Greene argues you'll learn everything you need to know about PUBG there.

Soon you'll be able to vault and mantle obstacles as well as crouch.

a crucial part of the skill gap that, once understood, provides valuable intelligence. A lot of shooters employ gamified sound design, which is ultimately an unrealistic representation of how sound works. The result is that the sound design in games like Siege and Battlegrounds feels off because it's actually more realistic.

In PUBG, depending on the distance of the shooter and whether their gun is supersonic or subsonic, near misses will offer snaps or hisses, and the sound of the shot will come after (supersonic) or before (subsonic) the shot. It's easy to confuse the direction of the snap or hiss as the gunshot, when it's actually at a 90-degree angle to the shooter. Learning to ignore the sound of the miss to listen for the gunshot is an essential skill in PUBG, and it's a key feature for Greene.

"[We wanted] to create an environment that relied on your knowledge of how sound works," says Greene. "It's meant to be a realistic soundscape. We haven't achieved that yet. We're doing a lot of balancing because it's quite loud right now. Especially with gunshots, we wanted to make that a skill you have to learn. If you're getting shot from this direction, you hear a crack in this [other] direction, and understanding those mechanics, it's another skill to learn within the game."

Greene does concede, though, that like other facets of Battlegrounds, there's still work to be done with the sound design. "We haven't had time to pour into really finalising the sound work," admits Greene. "We're happy with the system, but we need to improve certain areas. We have been working with new spatialising systems and new systems internally to try and figure out how we can make the sound even better.

> "Once the public get their hands on it, I'm sure it'll be Assassin's Creed PUBG. It's going to change play styles"

"It's just a crazy time [in the lead-up to release]. People scream at us about optimisations like this, but there are things we're doing. Some of this stuff takes months to complete. We don't have infinite resources. Unfortunately, we can't just throw money at the problem. It's finding the right people to work on the team with the right experiences. At the end of the day, we want to deliver a great game that has great sound, is well optimised, and has wonderful worlds. After 1.0 we're not done; we want to keep going until we're happy that the game is in a great state."

MASTER OF META

Greene acknowledges there isn't a fixed meta in PUBG, and the meta tends to change with every update. On the road to the release of version 1.0, which is still on target to happen before the end of 2017, the meta is set to change again in some significant ways. The first big meta change will be with the inclusion of vaulting and climbing, which will offer players advanced movement options to replace what has been, since Early Access launch, quite restrictive when it comes to waist-high hurdles.

For the climbing, Greene is interested to see how far players take it once it hits the game. "We can set various heights for how much you can jump over and climb up onto, but I'm excited to see where people are going to get up to," says Greene. "We're only so inventive in the office. Once the public get their hands on it, I'm sure it'll be Assassin's Creed PUBG. I'm excited because it's going to change the verticality of the map. It's going to change play styles. It's going to introduce new wonderful metas of climbing."

Beyond version 1.0, the meta is set for at least one major change to the gunplay when Bluehole shuffles the ballistics system. "Currently, we're working on proper ballistics for the weapons, so that includes penetration and air drag," says Greene. "We want to do it carefully because it will change the game considerably once you add penetration in."

There's even hope that the destructibility will be extended beyond wooden shacks, fences, and doors, too. "I'd love to see more destructibility," says Greene. "But using the engine we're using and server concerns, doing full-on destructibility like Rainbow Six Siege, which I think would be cool, it's just not feasible. It would require a whole lot of work from us. The 1.0 release at the end of the year, it's not development done for us. We see this as a game we can support for 10 or 20 years, maybe in the future we might have fully destructible environments, but not right now."

DEATH IN THE DESERT

As far as shooters go, it's rare that a game with only a single map can continue to grow in popularity. Obviously, the RNG systems in PUBG help keep it feeling unique with every plane drop onto Erangel, even if early game descends into a familiar mix of loot simulator, hunting, or being hunted. Depending on where the circle lands, and how much RNGesus is feeling generous with vehicular spawns, you might even encounter the mid-game running simulator.

When it comes to introducing new maps, such as the impending desert map, Greene sees it as more than just adding new places to fight for the sake of adding them. Players also shouldn't expect the new maps to feel familiar, either. "I want new, unique maps," explains Greene. "It shouldn't be we're designing maps for Battlegrounds; we're designing unique terrains that Battlegrounds happens on. With our custom games, as well, we don't want to restrict the feel of the world to be specific to the Battlegrounds or Battle Royale game mode: that it's just a world that these game modes take place on.

"Moving forward, we want to do that with our desert map: it's hot and dry, that kind of terrain. It's just a different feel. We want to increase the city sizes for the desert map, and really try to give it a new terrain or a new environment to fight in, but continually

PLAY OF THE GAME

There are few things worse than dying in PUBG and not knowing how the hell it happened. Cue the entry of the 3D replay system. Once introduced, 3D replays will let players review the match they've just played. This will work as a great learning tool, and might help bolster anti-cheat care of video evidence. Greene hopes to include 3D replays in the 1.0 release.

Usually it's obvious who shot you, but sometimes you'll want to consult the upcoming 3D replay.

MAP ROULETTE

After release, once Battlegrounds has more than just one or two maps, Brendan Greene doesn't want players to have a say in the map they're loading into. Greene compares this to what it was like in the original Battle Royale mod for Arma 2, which had four randomly chosen maps. Initially, though, Greene says players will be able to pick to play on the new map(s).

testing and giving the players new places to fight in. [We want players] to continue testing themselves to see if they can survive in this environment or that environment."

MAP-SPECIFIC SHOOTERS

Thankfully, the differences will be more profound for the new maps than just grass, sand, snow, or even the size of the cities. Each map is set to have different weapons and vehicles, too.

"When we add new maps, we want to add new weapons, as well, and specific weapons for specific maps," says Greene. "I don't think there'll ever be one set meta. As we balance and tweak stuff, there will be changes to people's favourite weapons and stuff like that. We don't intend to overdo it. We just want to give a good variety and a bit more selection to the different classes we have already.

"For our new map, we have map-specific vehicles that suit that sort of terrain. We want to continue that going forward. In the new maps, we add vehicles that you would find on that map, and not just a core set of vehicles that you find on all maps. But, I want to add, there's a big truck we have that we showcased six months ago that we haven't had time to really figure it out, because it has six wheels, and terrain bumps. Things like that where you can travel around with lots of people, where they're slightly slower but they provide more cover. It's just about providing different experiences for playing the game. We want to increase the vehicle variety but spread over the new maps."

With the 1.0 release of Battlegrounds just around the corner, Greene and his team at Bluehole are focused on a stable official release. Greene sees Battlegrounds as a service, though, with ongoing development funded by the cosmetic loot crates and subsequent cosmetic economy on the Steam Market. Assuming there isn't some mass exodus of players, Greene's pledge of new weapons, vehicles, as well as places and ways to fight will likely keep players coming back for seconds for a long time to come. PC

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF RNGESUS

When it comes to Playerunknown's Battlegrounds, RNGesus is a fickle overseer. RNGesus giveth and he taketh away. Randomness is a big part of Battlegrounds, and while skill certainly helps, there are tried-and-proven techniques that can help minimise being screwed over by RNG and give you a fighting edge. **NATHAN LAWRENCE** and **DAVID HOLLINGWORTH** walk you through the 10 Commandments.

Fully, fully automatic

Nathan: If you've played enough Battlegrounds, you've likely been caught in one of those situations where you're balancing ranged combat (sniper rifle) with close-range (shotgun) scenarios. Maybe this is by choice, or maybe it was the will of RNGesus. The P18C is a relatively new addition to Battlegrounds, and it kicks all kinds of arse. It has 17 rounds in the clip by default, which jumps to 25 with an extended mag, and can spew out bullets in full-auto firing mode. If you're looking to engage exclusively in close- or mid-range combat, consider having three fully automatic options across your two primaries and pistol. This is even better with the quickdraw-extended attachments, which means you can quickly switch between shooters as guns run dry.

Pick your shots, your targets, and your tools

David: Yes, you absolutely want at least one full auto weapon. Maybe two, maybe even three… but even if your loadout is all rock-and-roll, make sure you have a clear idea of how those weapons are best engaged. Always have one weapon set for full-auto, and one for semi-auto: one for close-in room-clearing, one for open-ranged warfare. Generally speaking, if you can you want an AKM or SKS with a scope for cross-country, and ideally a UMP or—if RNGesus loves you—a fully kitted Vector for CQB situations.

Hitch a ride...

N: If you're feeling bold, camp out in the back of a car (middle seat) or near a car. When other players go to use it, shoot or bonk them on the back of the head from the middle seat. It's a high risk/reward strategy, and players are getting better at looking out for it. Not so long ago, the devs changed the white circle to make it harder to predict where it'll shrink to next. To stop Battlegrounds from becoming a sprinting simulator, it's worth securing a vehicle (or boat), particularly early on. They make a lot of noise, but they also cover a lot more distance than legging it.

Or leg it

D: Vehicles are great, and there's no arguing that running down another player is one of gaming's rare joys. But vehicles are a double-edged sword. For one thing, you concede the initiative in nearly every way—everyone will hear you coming, and you will not be able to return fire (unless you're in a squad of course). Similarly, when you do get where you're going, there's a very good chance you're going to be under someone's sights when you disembark.

The fact is it's almost always possible to run across the map no matter the spawns. Sure, if you have to cross a bridge things can get hairy, but in over 150 hours of games, I think I've only died outside the zone a half-dozen times. And if you've got the right gear—painkillers and energy drinks—you're even better equipped to cover the map on foot.

And don't forget that you can always sling your weapons for a bit of extra speed.

Protip: keep your eyes on the road and hands upon the wheel.

An assortment of attachments

N: You don't know which weapons you'll find when looting a house. Early on, it's worth grabbing attachments and even ammo for a variety of weapons in case you find them. This is easier if you chance upon a higher-level backpack early on, but grabbing an array of stuff means you don't have to double back to enhance a gun with attachments. For instance, you might want to pick up a shotgun choke, M4 stock, and vertical grip early on, if they're on offer, so you can slap them on the corresponding gun as soon as you find it.

Conserve your inventory

D: The problem with trying to Jack-of-all-guns your loadout is you not only run out of space, but you're setting yourself up for the necessity of dumping excess gear at a future point in the game—and you really want to minimise the time you spend in the UI.

By all means, pick up everything you find in the first five minutes, especially if you've managed to touch down clear of other players, or in a large building like those lovely, three-storey apartment blocks. But you really want to be making some hard decisions before you move into any area where you don't want to be struggling with what to dump and pick up while you're under fire. Ideally, you don't ever want to be moving about with a full pack—though, admittedly, this is advice even I find difficult to follow. When you're down to the last twenty or so, and you really want to see if the guy you just took out has a better scope, you'll have a much easier time if you're not having to actively drag stuff to drop on the ground before you can then drag stuff onto your weapons.

'Chuting range

N: One of the best tactics for increasing your chances of finding a weapon before anyone else dropping in the same area is to hit the ground first. Push your player into a full vertical dive to do this. It's a tactic that works particularly well for areas with roof access, and gives you a chance to take shots at parachuting players who are slow to the murder party. Conversely, consider popping your 'chute early and swinging—holding W for a second or two, then releasing, to swing your feet—away from the flight path and to far-out locations. You'll land later, but you're less likely to have heaps of other enemy players to contend with and even less likely to have to worry about players behind you.

...

D: Dude! You just covered every god-damn base with this one! How am I expected to say you're wrong?!?

Well, I'll add this: while you're falling, be flexible. Look around, see where other players are going, and change your drop accordingly. Aim for a building or a handy rooftop, but if you see a vehicle, and it's clear, run like fun for that thing and book it to areas outside the drop. Doesn't matter if it's outside the initial circle, because at this stage of the game a vehicle is relatively safe to use.

High-calibre stakes

N: You really want a primary weapon early on, and a solid one at that. The trick is, RNGesus doesn't always gift such treats. Add in the pressure of other enemies landing around you, and things can get tricky. This is why I always carry a pistol early on, even if I've found a primary, to ensure I have at least something to shoot with. Pistols are also a great mid-range complement to a shotgun. Higher-calibre pistols hit hard, especially against unarmoured foes, which is why I love the .45 pistol. The revolver, which takes 7.62 ammo, doesn't fire fast enough for my tastes, but if you back yourself to land hits, it's a great option. If your aim is less flashy, spamming out 15 rounds from a 9mm pistol may do the trick, but the harder-hitting pistols are great, even against players with primaries early on. Pistol suppressors also seem to drop more regularly than SMG, assault rifle, and sniper rifle ones, too, so you can have at least one stealthy firearm option.

Berretta love

D: Yeah, the .45 is a great leveller, but like the revolver, the lower magazine capacity puts a premium on your own ability to land rounds on target. The 15 shots in even an un-specced Berretta gives you a lot of rounds to play with, and if you are accurate, that's more rounds on target, which is generally a better thing.

Also, really think about shotgun choice—it's easy to dismiss the double-barrelled shotty, but it is unique in the game for its rate of fire. Sure, it only has two shots, but if you're clearing a building early-game, and run into someone, you can deliver those two shots almost as one into someone's face and pretty much insta-kill them.

Shut the front door...

N: …and all doors, for that matter. Lots of players are in the habit of shutting external doors these days, which is a savvy move for luring unsuspecting foes into an ambush. But not everyone shuts internal doors. Smarter players will drive past, use scopes from afar, or third-person peeking to look inside buildings to see if people are there, and the first thing they check is internal doors. Leaving loot on the ground is a good idea to make enemy players think a building is safe to enter, and then you can get the drop on them, even if you have a terrible starting weapon.

Or don't

D: There's a lot of psychology at play in how to set up a building you're hiding in, and how to approach one. If you're going to be going around closing doors, remember that if you've only done this in the building you're currently in, and have left other doors open as you've left surrounding buildings, it's going to be pretty obvious where you are. Similarly, many players have an understanding of what buildings will be looted by the game's end-stage, so will likely be super-suspicious of EVERY building.

If you've got a good headset or speaker setup that can really pinpoint other players, maybe think about leaving your building open and empty, so that a panicking player will run into it, thinking that it's empty and ready to be barricaded by them.

Protip: always roll your sleeves up so the cuff's button doesn't catch on your gun.

Talk this way

N: You may have noticed that RNGesus is a whole lot crueller (or kinder, depending on your luck) in Solo than in Duo or Squad modes. The tactical possibilities increase when you have players on your side, and you should be chatting to them with useful information. For instance, you should tell them which weapons you have, and useful things you come across that you might not need. It's easier to be a properly equipped duo or squad when everyone is working together to find the relevant ammunition, attachments, and meds for other players. It's even easier if you let them know what you're looking for, and they do the same for you. There's nothing worse than getting into midgame or endgame and feeling underequipped, knowing full well you'll likely be going up against the RENGesus blessed who have better stuff.

Talk is gold, but gear is better

D: Yeah, can't argue that one, partner. Learn to read off the game's compass dial, and to give clear, clean instructions. There's a reason that real-world military have very set drills for things like this. Compare the pair…

"Uh, there's a guy! In the building! FUCK FUCK FUCK!"

"Contact, forward, 195 my position, upper story, left window."

Now, you can't always be that specific, but even just "CONTACT!" makes things pretty clear. If you see a car or something else cool, don't just yell, "WAIT!" Say something like, "Vehicle, down on the road." Make your subject super clear.

Also, you'll sound kinda super cool. At the same time, you can get too TactiCool. If you're team has no idea with 'defilade' and 'enfilade' even mean, it's less than useful.

One thing to consider in four-person squad mode, however, is to play with three people. Unlike Nathan, I think RNGesus is super-bloody-rough on squads, because there's less gear to go around, meaning you can be woefully ill-equipped. Thing is… so's everyone else. If you have a three-person squad (which is also easier on communication and keeping track of), that's the same amount of gear for less people. I'd back three well-equipped players against four with just t-shirts and shotguns any day of the week.

> "learn to read off the compass dial, and to give clear, clean instructions"

Protip: stand in the shade. Direct sunlight is really bad for you.

Run like you're being shot at

N: Running in straight lines is a fast way to be looking at that dreaded, 'Better luck next time!' killscreen text. Crossing open areas tends to make you easier to spot but, generally, running anywhere in Battlegrounds is best done like you're under fire. Move between cover. Run in unpredictable lines. A lot of the time, you won't be shot at, but when you are, you'll be harder to hit. You won't always know when you're in an enemy player's sights in Battlegrounds.

Have an aggro warm-up round...

N: We play in a day and age where we constantly shift between different games. While familiar, Battlegrounds has some interesting control quirks—like the tapping or holding right mouse button for first-person or third-person ADS—that can get you killed if your muscle memory is set to any other shooter. Because of this, it's best to do a warm-up round with the intention of getting into fights. Head for popular areas on the flight path (like Sosnovka Military Base, Georgopol Storage Containers, or School). This'll help stop you from goofing up the keys when you get into your first firefight late in the game. It's also a good way for getting your eye in and building shooting confidence before you get caught up in a tense shootout with only a handful of players remaining.

... Or just be cool

D: This can work really well, but it also builds up certain habits—namely, that the first game of the night is a rush-job. This is fine by yourself, but you really need to think differently if you're playing with a pal. So be clear on how you're intending to play—things will not go well if you rush the first enemy you see while your buddy is trying to carefully sneak away.

The sounds of war

N: Unlike other shooters, Battlegrounds doesn't have a huge arsenal, which is great in terms of familiarising yourself with the different weapon sounds. Every gun sounds different and, with a bit of gameplay knowledge, you can quickly tell which specific weapon someone has just by the sound it makes. Gunshots can also be useful for zeroing in a likely enemy location, even if they're not shooting at you. Combine the gunshot knowledge with the kill feed to determine who's won a nearby gunfight, and what type of weapon you might be coming up against. You should also reverse this knowledge to know that your gunshots travel a really long distance, so maybe reconsider taking that tricky shot against an unsuspecting enemy to not give away your position. PC

FOR MORE PUBG TIPS, HEAD TO PCPOWERPLAY.COM.AU

COMBAT DEVOLVED

I HATE RUNNING BACKWARDS

DEVELOPER BINX INTERACTIVE/CROTEAM INCUBATOR • **PUBLISHER** DEVOLVER DIGITAL/CROTEAM PUBLISHING • **DUE** 2018
www.binxinteractive.com

There have been rumours circulating about a new Serious Sam game being in the works for quite some time, and for anyone who likes old-school circle strafe and backpedal style FPS in which hordes of enemies charge you and you run around like an idiot trying to kill them all and survive, that is definitely something to look forward to. At a recent Devolver Digital hands-on event, we had a chance to play a new Serious Sam game, and it wasn't anything like we expected. In a good way.

I Hate Running Backwards is another in the Serious Sam side project series, like the side-scrolling shooter with gun stacking mechanics, Serious Sam Double D, or the turn-based Serious Sam: The Random Encounter. These side projects are developed by indie studios with collaboration from Croteam and have been, for the most part, fantastic. I Hate Running Backwards is a Serious Sam take on the infinite runner, but instead of jumping over obstacles, players instead have to kill the seemingly endless waves of kamikazes, spiders and other Serious enemies that come from the bottom of the screen.

Like the name suggests, the chosen character (Sam is balanced between firepower and speed, but the two other characters are slanted more heavily on one specific area) runs (one uses a vehicle depending on the randomly generated level) backwards the entire time, firing whatever weapon is equipped at the hordes of enemies flooding in from the bottom of the screen. Rather than being stationary in the middle of the screen as is common in infinite runners, players have complete control over the character enabling them to dodge obstructions that come in from the top of the screen as well as pick up power-ups, such as a limited window or infinite ammo, better weapons with limited ammo or shields, as well as bust open golden chests that contain more powerful pickups, like drone companions or more health. In case you get too complacent and only focus on the top and bottoms of the screen, some levels also have enemies that rush in from the side, such as giant charging bull things (they could be Syrian Were-Bulls from SS: The Next Encounter) that break through walls and can kill the character in a single hit, no matter how much life they still have.

In addition to guns, each character also has a melee weapon not only capable of damaging enemies who are too close, but also of destroying obstacles, deflecting projectiles or sending bombs hurtling back to where they came from. This deflection mechanic is especially handy during the boss battles. Defeat a boss and gain a perk such as more health or extra speed for the rest of your run. Die and start a new run.

Although simple, I Hate Running Backwards is a lot of fun and should be even more enjoyable when played cooperatively. There is no set release date as yet but even at this stage it feels polished and completely accessible. It's no replacement for a true new Serious Sam game, but if it sells for a similar price to the other Serious Sam spinoffs, then it should definitely be a good way to kill some time until a new FPS does arrive. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

It certainly captures the spirit of our fave Egyptian themed Serious Sam levels.

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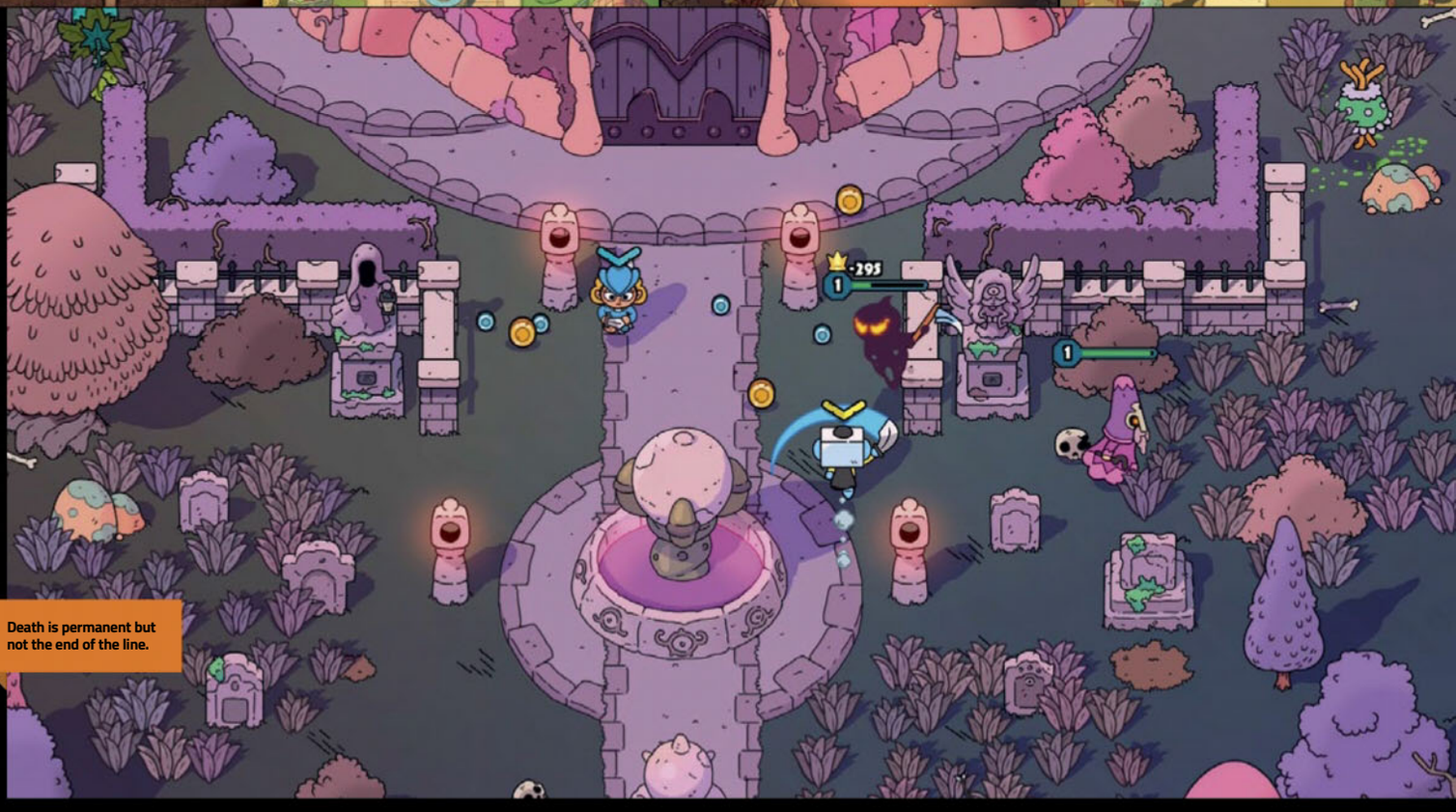
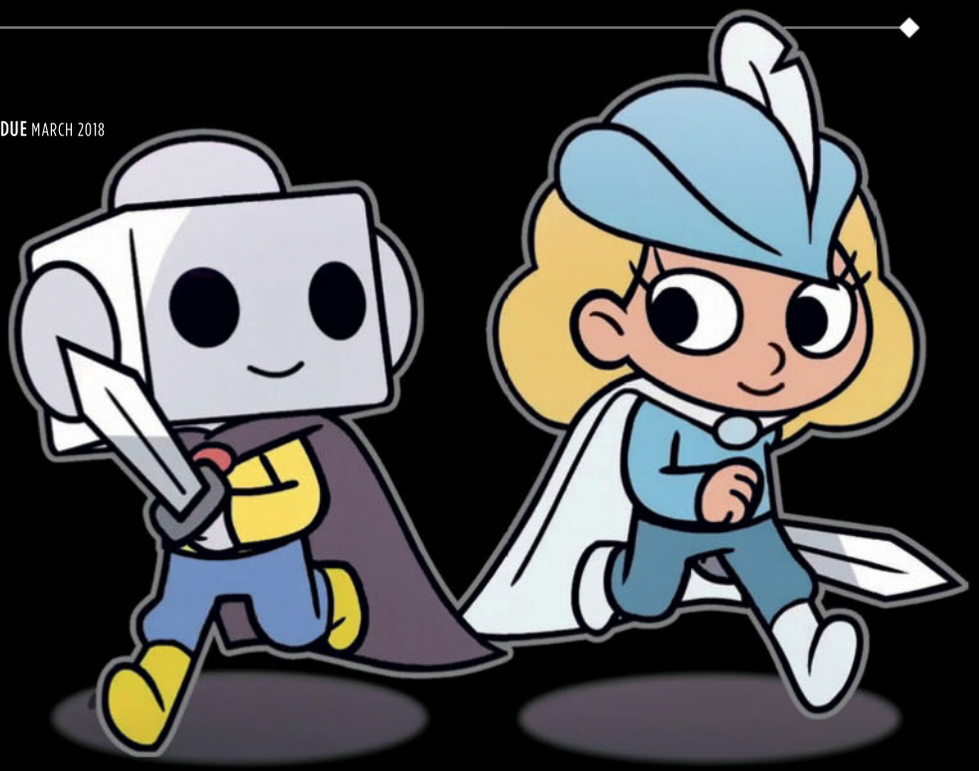


Death is permanent but not the end of the line.

MORE OF THE SAME

THE SWORDS OF DITTO

DEVELOPER ONEBITBEYOND • **PUBLISHER** DEVOLVER DIGITAL • **DUE** MARCH 2018
theswordsofditto.com



The Swords of Ditto is adorable, with a look that immediately brings to mind a number of modern animated series such as Steven Universe and Adventure Time, but don't let the look fool you – there are some dark themes at play in this action RPG. Actions count in Swords of Ditto, and your success or failure can lead to some serious changes in the world. You, a young boy, girl or robot, depending on what the game generates as its first Sword of Ditto wake up on a beach. A magical floating dung beetle tells you that you're the prophesied saviour of Ditto, but first you must come into town and grab your legendary gear.

The evil Morno is returning to the world of Ditto and only the Sword can save the people. You're not necessarily the Sword that can do that. Death in Ditto is permanent but progress isn't. Your current Sword may die, but another champion of prophecy will arise to take their place and gear to continue the quest. Even though death isn't the end of the adventure, it isn't at all a trivial thing. Success or failure during the different chapters influence the future of Ditto. We recently had a chance to play through the first chapter of the game, waking as a young curly haired girl in the beach. During the hands-on, I inspected Morno's tomb only to discover that she had already awoken and eventually made my way through a dungeon that contained one of the anchors that holds Morno's spirit on Ditto. Every enemy I faced fell before my sword or bow, and every puzzle was overcome (eventually) until I reached the final room in which I faced a fallen champion for the anchor. I died. Because I didn't manage to destroy the anchor in the first chapter, by the time the next Sword awoke 100 years had passed and darkness gripped the land. Had I succeeded, the world would be a brighter place.

This idea of death not being the end but still having significant consequence really serves to differentiate Swords of Ditto from other Zelda-like action RPGs. The approach to exploration, puzzle solving and combat is quite traditional, but thanks to the added stakes of failure, the game doesn't feel anywhere near as light-hearted or whimsical as the look and gameplay might imply.

Best played with a controller, controls are straightforward and simple, with one face button tied to your sword, another to a bow, and a third to a defensive roll. Different equipment of gear can be assigned to the d-pad allowing for quick access to healing items or the travel kazoo, a magical "instrument" capable of summoning a bus to take you to any unlocked stop on the map. Kill things for money and loot and visit the town to upgrade your gear. It's all straightforward and easily approachable, yes, but from what we've had a chance to play, it's also engrossing, challenging and extremely enjoyable, in single player or in co-op. The Swords of Ditto hits PCs in March 2018, but in the meantime you can check out our hands on gameplay at pcpowerplay.com.au. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

> "doesn't feel anywhere near as light-hearted or whimsical as the look might imply"

WHAT WOULD **YOU DO?**

BURDEN OF COMMAND

DEVELOPER GREEN TREE GAMES • **PUBLISHER** GREEN TREE GAMES • **DUE** 2018
burdenofcommand.com

I've played a lot of games centred around World War II. I've fought through Stalingrad in first-person shooters, fought over the hedgerows of France in strategy games, and braved the torpedoes of a destroyer escort in numerous naval simulations.

But I've never come across a game that sounds quite like Burden of Command before.

Burden is a tactical leadership RPG. Sure, there are units to move about, and yeah, you're controlling your company over a map of sorts to achieve your objective – but it's not about fire and movement. Rather, your challenge is to navigate the moral decisions of leading soldiers in a time of war.

Psychology, and how you deal with your own, and your soldiers', is just as important as tactics. The morale and stress levels of your troops are all tracked, but what you do matters just as much. You can develop distinct mindsets for both you as the company leader, and your company. As a leader, the mindset you begin with is how you thought during peacetime; you may be Compassionate, which means your men will suffer less casualties, for instance.

But as you fight through Europe, those mindsets could change, or become reinforced, with a subsequent effect upon your unit and its performance.

The developers give an example how you react to a sergeant, broken by artillery fire, who may be about to fire at you, and lead his squad into action. Shooting him ups your Zeal, but you lose the soldier. Just telling him to stop boosts your Idealism, but could lead to morale loss and casualties, while knocking the rifle out of his hands leads to a lack of trust in the unit, but an increase in your Cunning. Effectively, the choices you make during – as well as before and after a battle - shape you and your men.

It's these random RPG events that give a greater sense of immersion into the tactical aspect of the game. Some events may end battles early, or lead to a greater chance of success, but you never know when they're going to happen – and there'll always be a price to pay later.

The game's inspired by real events, as explored in the book 'American Courage, American Carnage', by Professor of History John C McManus, and makes extensive use of photographic material from the US National Archives – much of which has never even been seen before, let alone used to illustrate a game. All the maps are based on period reconnaissance and Google Maps, while the game's team includes serving and ex-military. And more modern influences include series like Band of Brothers.

Building upon the legacy of games such as Steel Panthers and Squad Leader (yes, the classic hex-based wargame, cardboard counters and all!), Burden of Command looks like it's trying to introduce something wholly new in the annals of WW2 strategy games.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC

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KEEPING THE COLD WAR ON ICE

PHANTOM DOCTRINE

DEVELOPER CREATIVEFORGE • **PUBLISHER** GOOD SHEPHERD • **DUE** 2018

It's 1983 and the Cold War is getting hotter. You are either a KGB or CIA agent, burned by your own agency. You now command The Cabal, a secret intelligence organisation bent on uncovering and stopping the even more secret conspiracy that is manipulating world governments and leading the world to the brink of annihilation. You may be a player on the world stage, but compared to the opposition, you're tiny. Rather than playing the hard game, you have to play smart, using intelligence (in the covert operative sense) to pre-empt the enemy, infiltrate their ranks and disrupt their supply lines. This use of intelligence plays out in multiple ways. One of the key jobs of the head of an agency is to assign operatives to different areas of the world. Enemy operatives move around depending on the demands of their missions, so it's up to the player to place their own operatives around the world to watch for them or derail their plans.

When your operatives in the wild encounter elements of the conspiracy it doesn't necessarily mean you're in for a fight. You may be able to place a tracking device on an unaware enemy operative so you can tail them back to their base of operations, or you may come across information hinting at the wider conspiracy. This information can then be analysed and put on the board. Analysis consists of scanning documents for keywords or phrases and linking them to other documents with the same keyword or phrase. In this manner the agency can discover greater levels of the conspiracy. Say that the agency is looking for a conspiracy base in which they are brainwashing friendly agents, Manchurian Candidate style. You know that the base is either in Poland or Lithuania but don't know the specifics. By analysing data collected through covert operatives or through combat missions, players can link together evidence that will point to one location or the other, leading to the next set of missions. If analysing data doesn't sound like much fun, players can assign an operative to data analysis. While the process will undoubtedly take longer than performing the task manually, the results will still be the same.

Once the location of an operation has been established, this will ultimately lead to a turn-based event in which operatives must infiltrate an area, perform their task, like retrieving a dossier, sabotaging a machine, assassinating a target or what have you, before making a getaway. During the set-up phase of the operation, players can do a number of things depending on the type of intelligence they have uncovered or steps they have taken before launching the action proper. Players may be able to have a covert operative working in the building they are to infiltrate, allowing them to turn off cameras or subdue guards before they breach. They may be able to set up a sniper capable of firing from one of the cardinal compass points, or a spotter capable of looking through any open window or door they are facing to give a clearer picture of how the opposition is positioned inside. You may even be able to flip an enemy operative you have previously brainwashed.

On the surface, Phantom Doctrine looks like most other turn-based tactics games, such as X-Com or Frozen Synapse, but the emphasis on covert action changes things up quite a bit. This stealth angle means that movement and action aren't as delineated as they are in most turn-based games. Each operative has multiple move points and action points, and using an action doesn't end a turn, so instead of entering a room and shooting an enemy being a single turn, an operative in Phantom doctrine could enter the room, shoot the operative, grab the body, move it behind a desk and take cover all in the same turn. Should things get more heated, however, operatives are professionals - there is no percentage to hit chance. Operatives always hit. The only thing deciding if a target lives or dies is range, the weapon itself and body armour.

Phantom Doctrine is due for release some time in 2018. We can't wait to keep the Cold War cold. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

Your operatives are capable of much more than just move or shoot.

Developer Creativeforge cut its turn-based teeth on Hard West.

Games 268

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES

Games as Service

How do you review a game that's never finished?

I recently got the chance to sit down with two of the developers and producers of World of Tanks. One of my big takeaways is that there's a whole swathe of games that are essentially never really complete - they're an ongoing service, constantly updated, tweaked, added to, balanced and rebalanced to keep the experience fresh for players for every stripe. That certainly covers World of Tanks, and it's definitely the case for this issue's big game, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. Both are games I have written A LOT about; I reviewed WoT for a couple of outlets back in the day, but it occurs to me that those reviews are now essentially useless - the game's just not what it was. The same will go for PUBG, which hits version 1.0 on PC later this year, but will it be in a 'reviewable' state? Not really - this is a game that clearly is aiming for the long term.

I will always stand by my Shadow of War review: it's just really, really annoying, and I doubt that will ever change. But games as a service is something else altogether.

Now, what's the bet Daniel asks me to review PUBG next issue?

David Hollingworth

Digital Editor

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POWERED BY REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

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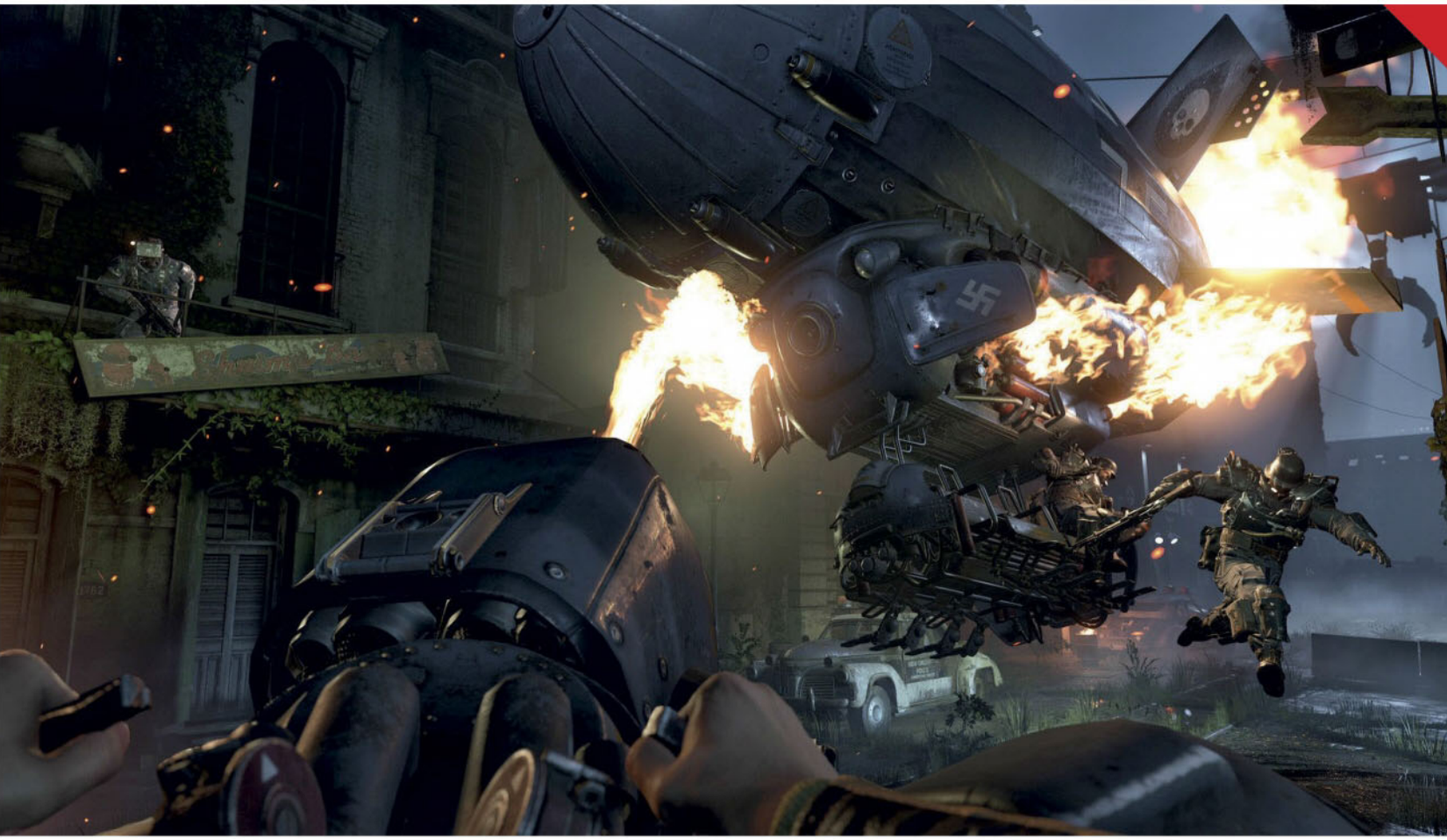


Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

Punch a Nazi today

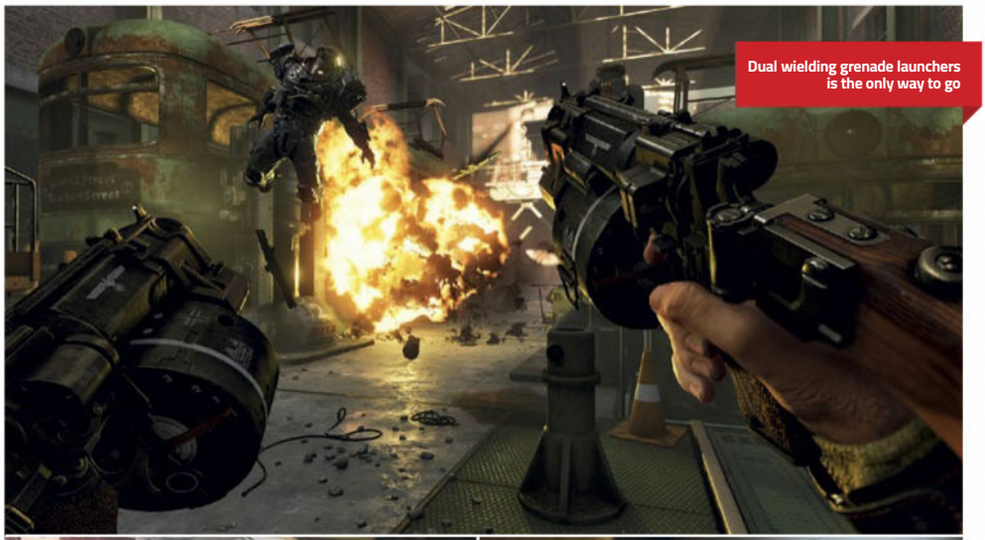
DEVELOPER MACHINE GAMES • **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • **PRICE** $59.95 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM, RETAIL
Wolfenstein.bethesda.net

There is a bonkers moment around the 5-6 hour mark in The New Colossus that radically changed the way I viewed the game. Rather than being an occasionally funny but rather grim look at America being under the grip of the Nazi regime, a-la The Man in the High Castle, it transformed into something gloriously silly without losing any of the actual heart of the rather maudlin story of loss and redemption. Although not perfect, Wolfenstein II captures what gaming can do better than any other form of entertainment – give you a visceral thrill and challenge while still managing to tell a story capable of moving you.

Most of the time when established characters are given elaborate backstories, the experiment backfires. Rob Zombie gave Michael Myers a history and it took the character from being an implacable, unstoppable evil and transformed it into an ugly kid with issues. Sheldon, the arguable centrepiece of one of the worst shows of all time, The Big Bang Theory, was given a backstory with Young Sheldon, but all that did was prove that the character was never remotely amusing. We learn about B.J. Blazkowicz's childhood in The New Colossus, but rather than cheapening the character, it instead gives him some depth, and offers up a reason why he never gives up, no matter how difficult the odds. The sensitive son of a kind Jewish mother and a racist douchenozzle who blames all of life's ills on anyone duskier than snow, B.J. suffered a pretty abusive childhood, and his constant heroics and drive could be viewed as an attempt to be as unlike his father as possible.

When we first encounter B.J. in The New Colossus he's a wreck, on death's door but still in a fighting mood. His legs don't work, most of his intestines have been removed and the rest of him is too busy not dying to do much else. Eva's Hammer, the giant U-Boat stolen by the Kreisau Circle to serve as the moving base of the resistance has been snared by Irene Engel. Just in time to defend the boat from invading Nazis, Blazkowicz awakens from his latest coma, hauls himself into a wheelchair and pick up a gun again. This first level of the game is unlike anything else that follows. It controls differently and moves at a vastly different pace but is in many way indicative of the game as a whole. Machine Games is more than willing to change course when necessary, or add mechanics at odd times to spice things up.

When we first meet B.J. he is essentially a very squishy tank trundling around in his wheelchair, moving slowly and shooting wildly. In the chair B.J. is incapable of stealth or speed, can't climb stairs and due to his weakened state his health constantly drops. Not too long after



Dual wielding grenade launchers is the only way to go

the hero inherits some sweet power armour that allows him to move just like he could before he was blowed up real good, as well as giving him the additional ability to perform a ground slam that will knock open hatches, giving players extra options for making their way around levels. Later still B.J. can get stilt legs giving access to high areas, a collapsible torso that allows him to fit through small cracks and a shoulder charge that can barrel through walls or turn Nazis into a red smear. Every time a new movement ability becomes available it feels like a reward, and although certain abilities definitely point towards certain styles of play, you're never locked into doing one thing at the detriment of others.

Much like as in the previous Wolfenstein games, Machine Games rewards you for playing rather than for committing to a style. Every time you kill an enemy in a certain way it is recorded and once a threshold has been reached you'll gain a noticeable gameplay bonus. Kill a set number of Nazis with stealth takedowns and you'll unlock progressive bonuses to movement speed while crouching. Kill them with thrown hatchets and you'll add to the number of hatchets you can carry at a time. Execute enough headshots and you'll gain a damage bonus when looking through sights. Kill enemies with environmental effects and you'll reduce the amount of damage you'll take from explosions. Sticking to one style of play – a stealth approach for example – will garner more style specific upgrades, but you'll most probably find yourself swapping between approached depending on what kind of enemy you're facing, what the level looks like or how you feel at any given moment. Stealth, run and gun, grenade spamming and melee are as fun and rewarding as each other, and to ignore any of the options is to miss out on some hectic fun.

> "the act of violent insurrection is the only reasonable response to the presence of Nazis"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You know it isn't necessarily space aliens, but most likely space aliens

+ You always wanted to nuke America

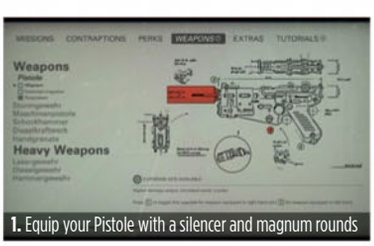
+ You know the only good Nazi is a dead Nazi

+ You like your men of action to have a tragic backstory

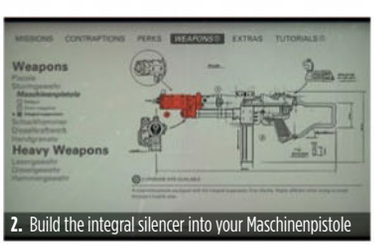
Wolfenstein: The New Order and The Old Blood were brutal games to be sure, but The New Colossus leaves both of those games for dead when it comes to brutality, both literally and emotionally. As evil as Death's Head was, Frau Engel is such a gleefully monstrous villain that if she wasn't so well performed by Nina Franoszek it would devolve into high camp. The America of the game is a constant reminder of Nazi oppression, from the irradiated remains of Manhattan to the small town streets of Roswell in which fully robed Klan members mingle happily with Nazi Stormtroopers, there is no let up when it comes to letting the player know that Nazis Are Bad and no matter how gorily you kill them, the act of violent insurrection is the only reasonable response to the presence of Nazis. Wolfenstein II has been called politically correct or some kind of SJW plot by people who think that some white supremacists are very fine people, but it's far simpler than that. MachineGames has taken the not at all radical stand of saying that Nazis, and all those who aide Nazis, are bad. There are no attempts to explain behaviour or to humanise the villains, and the game is all the better for it. Every moment of the game, from the cutscenes, B.J.'s internal monologue, to the look on an NPC's face serves to highlight that the Nazis deserve

SEQUENCE

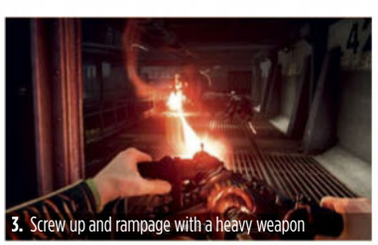
HOW TO STEALTH



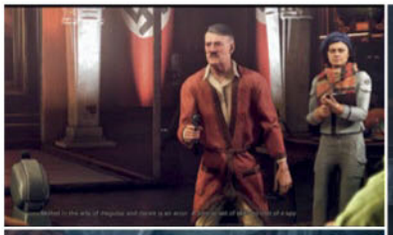
1. Equip your Pistole with a silencer and magnum rounds

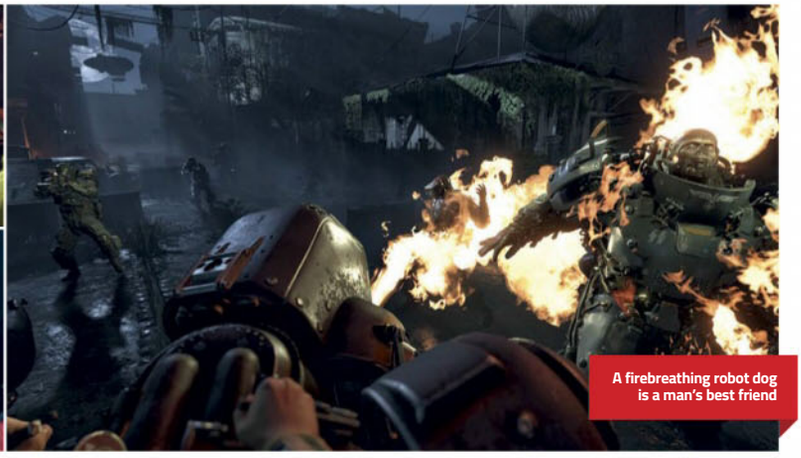


2. Build the integral silencer into your Maschinenpistole



3. Screw up and rampage with a heavy weapon





A firebreathing robot dog is a man's best friend

everything they have coming. They are targets for you to shoot, blow or hack apart with whatever you have at hand.

What you have at hand is an array of familiar but still hugely enjoyable weapons. The knife of the first two games has been replaced by a hatchet. It's a nasty thing for stealth kills and due to the weight has to be thrown in an arc to hit distant enemies. The Pistole is much like the 1960 pistol from The New Order, and the rest of the weapons feel very familiar but that does not detract from how much fun they are to use. Each of the weapons has three possible upgrades through kits found throughout the game. While some of these upgrades are straight damage bonuses, being able to add an integral silencer to the Maschinenpistole (SMG) really helps if you don't want to call too much attention to yourself in a firefight.

Not everything is perfect with Wolfenstein II – there seems to be a frustrating number of doors you can get momentarily stuck in, especially if there is a dead Nazi nearby; some of the autosaves are placed in such a way that you'll find yourself having to tackle difficult fights on a scrap of health with low ammo; and the difficulty seems to spike at random times, but even so, Wolfenstein II remains one of the most purely enjoyable single player FPS around. It's serious enough to make you care and bonkers enough that you're never quite sure what will happen next. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

SPOTLIGHT

NAZI PIGS FUCK OFF

1. Armour is ablative and gets chipped down before health

2. Depending on the stage of the game, B.J. has up to 200 max health

3. Heavy weapons can be ripped from emplacements or from the corpses of enemies. They are slow but do serious damage.

4. Playing in any style is continually rewarding. For killing 100 enemies with heavy weapons, all HWs double their ammo capacity.

5. Grenades, hatchets and ammo

OR TRY THIS:

FAR CRY 3
UBISOFT MONTREAL, 2012
- Vaas Montenegro
- Tribal Tattoos

TITANFALL 2
RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT, 2016
- Amazing singleplayer campaign
- Short singleplayer campaign

THE DARKNESS 2
DIGITAL EXTREMES, 2012
- Love story with brutal violence
- No Darkness 3

VERDICT:

There are a few technical problems with Wolfenstein II, and occasionally the story gets a little too grim, but it's still a pure joy to play.

9

Destiny 2

Guardians of the galaxy

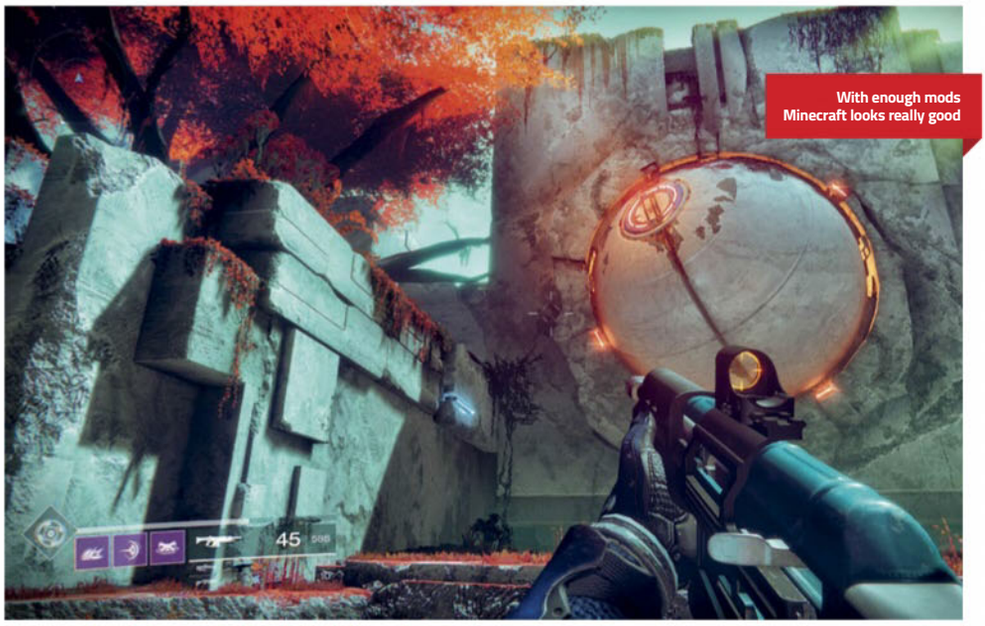
DEVELOPER BUNGIE • **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION • **PRICE** $69 • **AVAILABLE AT** BATTLE.NET, RETAIL
www.destinythegame.com

If you never played Destiny on console don't worry that you've missed something and that you won't be able to figure out what's going on. Rather than a sequel, Destiny 2 is more of a do-over. Not quite a reboot of a franchise but a game that addresses many of the criticisms of the first game while not doing anything hugely new. That may sound a bit reductive but it's not necessarily a negative. Destiny did some things very well, and those aspects of the game have been kept, but the levelling, progression and feel of the game have changed quite a bit. And now it's on PC. That makes all the difference.

If you were never caught up in the Destiny hype, here's the general gist. Nasty aliens don't like expansionist Earthlings and lay siege to the world. A friendly enigma known as The Traveller (a giant artificial moon thing) comes to the aid of people, granting some access to a power known as the Light, allowing them to become Guardians, the powerful protectors of the Last City. Well, the Guardians of the first Destiny failed, and the Red Legion (a powerful faction within the alien Cabal) have taken the Last City and severed the Guardian's connection to the Light, depriving them of their powers. Players take the role of Guardians who have found a way to reconnect with the Light and take the fight back to the Red Legion in an attempt to retake the Last City and protect mankind. (*Got it - Sub Ed.*)

There are three Guardian classes and three (entirely cosmetic) races to choose from when creating a character, but thanks to the way that skills and unlocks work, each class has three subclasses that can be switched between at any time. The Hunter is a fast DPS class with the ability to quickly dodge. The three subclasses; Gunslinger, Arcstrider and Nightstalker specialise in fast ranged damage, fast melee damage and DOTs/snares respectively. The Warlock is another DPS focused class with the ability to buff or heal companions. The Dawnblade focuses on Solar power (one of the four damage types in the game) and melee attacks while flying. The Voidwalker calls on the power of Void to deliver AoE damage with grenades and bombs and the Stormcaller is all about electrical AoE damage. The Titan is the tank of the three classes and is capable of erecting barriers to protect themselves or their companions but can also dish out serious damage as well. The Striker specialises in doing massive melee damage, The Sentinel is the most defensive of the subclasses and can form a shield that is both defensive and aggressive, and the Sunbreaker can throw flaming hammers as well as create zones that buff players and damage enemies.

When new skills or subclasses are unlocked these become a permanent fixture of the character, so players can change class and spec to suit any situation they may find themselves in, from a six-person raid through to



With enough mods Minecraft looks really good

> "a lot of fun to be had levelling, some fantastic locales to explore and enemies to kill"

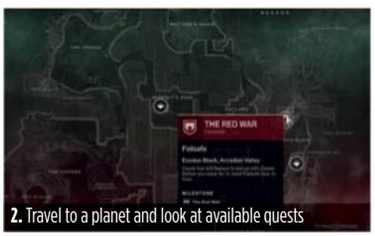
WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You don't think consoles should get all the Bungie games
+ You want to defend a giant golf ball
+ You think punching aliens to death is awesome

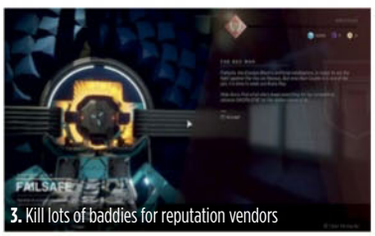
SEQUENCE

GUARDIAN 101

1. Choose a destination from the map



2. Travel to a planet and look at available quests


3. Kill lots of baddies for reputation vendors

a one-on-one PvP duel. The levelling process is much improved over the original game, with a story that takes players from Earth to Titan, Nessus and Io looking for lost Guardians and trying to find a way to fight back against the Red Legion. Once the level cap of 20 has been reached, the story doesn't stop but traditional levelling does. Instead of new skill unlocks, adventuring then is more about finding more powerful gear, to take the character's power level from around 200 to 305+. There's a lot of fun to be had levelling, with some fantastic locales to explore and some fantastically designed enemies to kill.

Outside of single-player or small group questing there are other activities to get involved with. The Crucible offers fun 4v4 PvP action over a variety of game modes, but if you're more interested in working with instead of against other players there are also frequent public events on each of the planets to get involved in. These events are telegraphed a few minutes in advance on the map, giving players time to book it across the map to participate. There are a few varieties of events, ranging from having to fight off hordes of small enemies to release guns that can be used to damage a giant walking tank, through to fighting off a giant eye-drone or closing a portal so no more enemies can pour through. If you finish a world event quickly enough it unlocks a heroic version of the event for a greater challenge and bigger, more powerful awards, making events worthwhile for players of all levels. And then there is the end-game content of raids and adventures. There is a lot of satisfying shooting to be had.

It remains to be seen whether there is enough end-game content to keep players satisfied in the long term, but for the first 100 or so hours it takes to fully level up a Guardian of each class, there is more than enough to do to keep all but the most demanding shooter fans happy. The PC version of Destiny 2 is excellent and plays beautifully once you have remapped some of the controls. Yes, single use shader microtransactions are bullshit, but they are a tiny problem compared to everything that Bungie got right.

TAVISH FORREST PC

SPOTLIGHT

BEING SOCIAL

1. Each Guardian can hold equip three weapons, one kinetic, one energy and one heavy

2. These three icons represent grenade, class ability and class melee ability. Each works on a cooldown.

3. Super abilities are charged through combat and vary depending on the class and subclass chosen. This Titan goes all Captain America

4. Public events spawn around the map and can be joined by anyone in the area. Players must work together to defeat powerful enemies within the time limit

OR TRY THIS:

WARFRAME
DIGITAL EXTREMES, 2013
- Rad F2P power armour shooting
- Seriously grindy

THE DIVISION
MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT, 2016
- Fantastic idea
- Dull execution

PLANETSIDE 2
DAYBREAK GAME COMPANY, 2012
- Great shooter/MMO hybrid
- Sparsely populated

VERDICT:

There is a lot of very satisfying shooting to be found in Destiny 2.

9

South Park: The Fractured but Whole

Can a video game be fart?

DEVELOPER UBISOFT • **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT • **PRICE** $79.95 • **AVAILABLE AT** UPLAY, STEAM, RETAIL
www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/south-park-fractured-but-whole

Within minutes of starting The Fractured but Whole, Buttlord, Douchebag or New Kid, depending on who he was interacting with, was on the toilet and I found myself playing a mini-game to drop a huge stink nugget in the bowl. Successfully mastering Buttlord's own toilet earned an in-game achievement, leading me on a quest to master all the toilets in town, a feat I happily pursued. It's a pointless pursuit, no matter how perversely enjoyable, and really kind of serves as a macrocosm of The Fracture but Whole as a, well, whole – a great deal of the game is more or less pointless, if entertaining filler spacing out some genuinely funny story missions.

It's the day after The Stick of Truth. The South Park kids are still playing their fantasy game and New Kid, at least at this point, is still the king of the fantasy realm (after taking the drastic step of farting on a man's balls), but this privileged position is not to last. Cartman has decided that fantasy is lame, so it's all about superheroes now. The king is demoted to New Kid again, or Buttlord, join's Cartman's superhero group, "Coon and Friends," and is given a tragic backstory of parental boning. From there on it's some serious skewering of superhero tropes separated by some busy work.

In a nod to Civil War, Coon and Friends - The Coon (Cartman), Human Kite (Kyle), Captain Diabetes (Scott Malkinson), Fastpass (Jimmy), Super Craig (Craig) and Mosquito (Clyde) - is at loggerheads with the Freedom Pals, a rival superhero group that fractured from Coon and Friends over fundamental philosophical differences (mainly that Cartman is a dick). Lead by Doctor Timothy (Timmy as a Professor X analogue), the Freedom Pals – Mysterion (Kenny), Toolshed (Stan), Tupperware (Token) and Wonder Tweak (Tweak) – are after the same thing as Coon and Friends, to clean up the town and to rescue a missing cat and claim the $100 reward so they can kick start their respective cinematic universe. Who will save the cat, why are black people disappearing from town, who is the mysterious social networking superhero, Call Girl, and can a fart truly be so bad that it breaks the space-time barrier are just some of the questions that are answered in the following 15 or so hours.

> "some serious skewering of superhero tropes separated by some busy work"

Unlike the original game, there is more to the story of The Fractured but Whole than simply sequential excuses for some South Park deep cuts and scatological humour. Both are still definitely present, but are tied together in a more organic way. A number of characters are brought in as not only cameos but also new mechanics. New Kid's character sheet being filled in is a key indicator of focus and a joke unto itself. Initially the player chooses a sex, but as the game progresses they must be more specific, going from male and female to having to choose their sexuality and gender identification. Later you need to define your racial identification in a similar manner, and later still you can help Seaman and Gay Fish get Gay Fish's mum into heaven (via a Flappy Bird analogue featuring a rainbow farting unicorn). Principal PC makes an appearance to instruct Buttlord on how to spot micro aggressions and punish people for it, giving players access to an extra quick attack when an enemy says something offensive during a battle.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

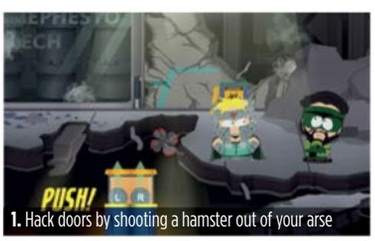
+ You want to defile every toilet you enter

+ You are still in what Freud called the "Anal Stage" of development

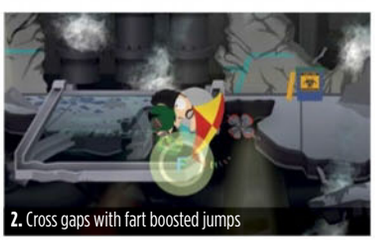
+ You are Lorde, la la la

SEQUENCE

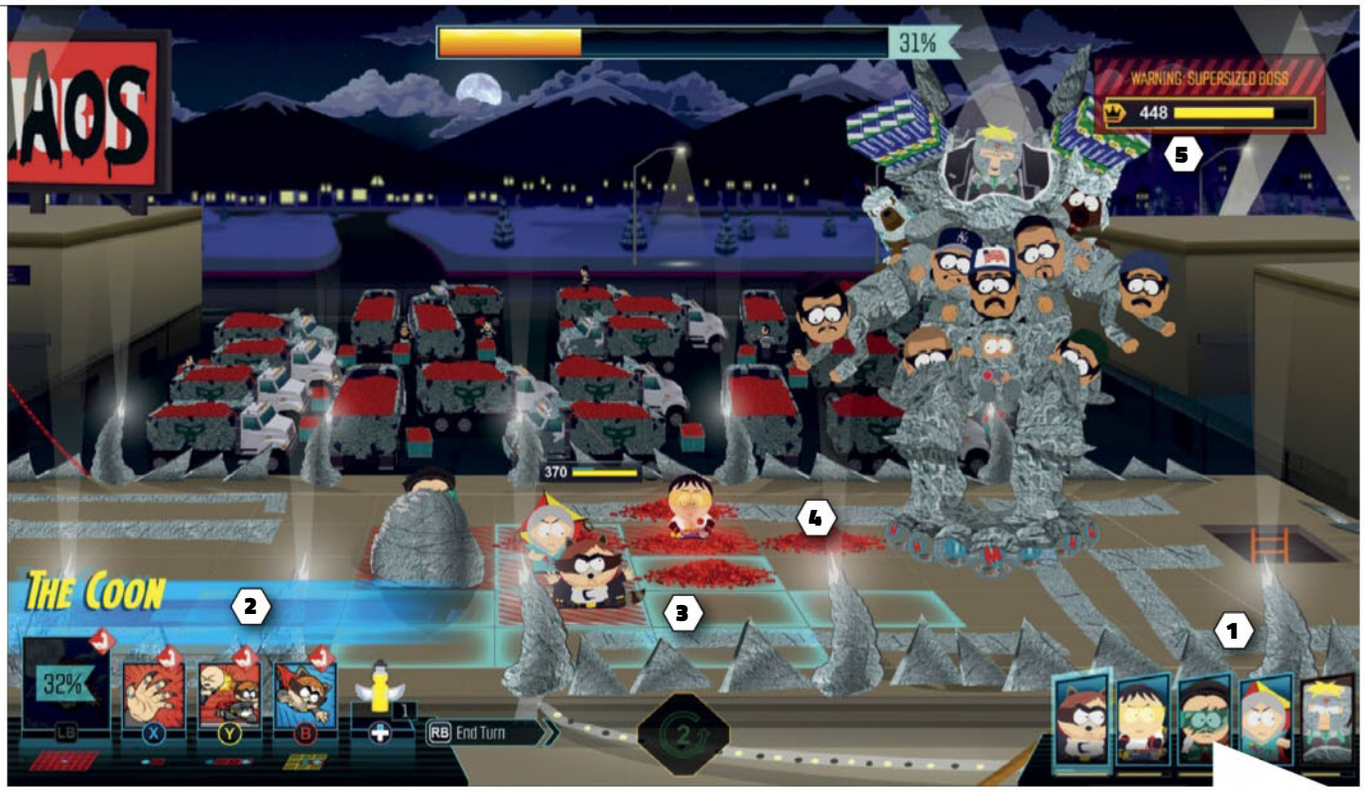
ALL ABOUT THE ARSE



1. Hack doors by shooting a hamster out of your arse


2. Cross gaps with fart boosted jumps

3. Break green things by farting in a diabetic kid's face



Combat has been vastly improved over the original game as well. Players now fight on a grid and have access to four abilities at any time. Each ability has a differing area of effect, so careful positioning is vital for effective use. Some abilities either cause knockback or drag a target towards the character and take extra damage if they hit other characters or obstacles on their way. Each ability has a critical timing, doing extra damage, healing or buffing if you hit buttons at the exact right time.

Unlike other characters, Cartman allows Buttlord to multiclass (to make up for his especially harsh backstory), eventually giving players four classes to choose skills from. In my playthrough I chose Brutalist, Cyborg, Assassin and Plantmancer, the first three being damage based and the final having a wide ranging heal and a special move resurrection. Having only four skills feels a little confining, but you can swap your abilities and party before any fight allowing you to really spec for the occasion.

As good as the new combat system is, it does manage to outstay its welcome. For every great fight, like a three stage confrontation with Professor Chaos and his power armour made of $20,000 of tin foil and a bunch of Mexicans, or the terror that is red wine drunk Randy Marsh, there are ten semi-random battles against sixth-graders, Raisins girls, Chaos minions or ninjas.

Even at the hardest difficulty, with the exception of boss battles, combat doesn't pose much of a challenge either. Similarly the light puzzling that utilises a number of fart or butt related shenanigans - flying with farts, shooting tinfoil wrapped hamsters into electronics to "hack them", using fart power to operate a sandblaster or farting to trigger Diabetic Rage in Captain Diabetes – doesn't offer much in the way of a challenge either.

This, combined with the fact that the game features day one story DLC, a $33.45 USD season pass and is riddled with bugs, some potentially game breaking, leads to a game that is fun and often funny, but too often falls back on the very RPG tropes it lampoons and doesn't feel fully realised. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

SPOTLIGHT

COON AND FRIENDS

1. Initiative order lets you know who is next so you can strategise

2. Each character has three powers and a super as well as access toa group inventory

3. The number of squares a character can travel is determined by their movement attribute

4. Each boss has a unique special ability. Professor Chaos can cover the ground with lava (red Legos) causing fire damage over time

5. Yes, that's a giant robot made of tinfoil and illegal immigrants

OR TRY THIS:

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH
OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2014
- + Khloe Kardashian's aborted Nazi foetus
- – Clunky combat

THE BARD'S TALE
INXILE ENTERTAINMENT, 2004
- + Combative narrator
- – Iffy port

BARKLEY, SHUT UP AND JAM: GAIDEN
TALES OF GAMES, 2014
- + Slam and Jam
- – Chaos Slam kills 15 million

VERDICT:

Full of funny moments and some great new mechanics but doesn't quite feel like it lives up to its own potential.

8

Hand of Fate 2

Deal with it

DEVELOPER DEFIANT DEVELOPMENT • **PUBLISHER** DEFIANT DEVELOPMENT • **PRICE** APPROX $30 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
www.defiantdev.com/hof2

A shrouded man sits across a table from you. Cards swirl in the air, shuffling themselves into patterns on the tabletop. A figurine appears on the table and moves to the first of the cards. It flips to reveal that a group of thieves are lying in wait to ambush some farmers. Do you jump to the defence of the farmers and attack the thieves? Do you warn the farmers of danger but let them know that your help doesn't come cheap? Do you mind your own business and watch the slaughter unfold? This is only the first card of many to flip in your first challenge. There will be many, many more.

Hand of Fate made for a welcome change in the action-RPG/Rogue-like realm when it was released in early 2015. A hybrid of deck building card game and Rogue-like ARPG, Hand of Fate saw players make their way through a card game, collecting rewards and building decks from those rewards to indicate possible loot drops in the next challenge. Although each component of the game was simple, they meshed so well together that it proved to be a totally engrossing experience. Hand of Fate 2 builds on that card game core in a huge way. In this sequel, the dealer is back to get revenge on the hero who defeated him, but this time around the player has much more influence over the eponymous hand.

Whereas the original game mostly reserved the deckbuilding for rewards, in Hand of Fate 2 the decks are everything. Creating the look of a character is based in the cards and every time you take on one of the Dealer's challenges you are an integral part of putting the challenge together. Rather than simply choosing what items you want to become available during the challenge, you also choose which companion you bring along with you as well as many of the events you will face during the challenge. While some of these events may lead to combat, the cards obtained through playing through challenges are more often than not geared more towards games of skill or chance. To put it more simply, the dealer takes care of the opposition but the player chooses what happens in between - it could be arm wrestling in a pub, a pie vendor prone to colourful but informative lies, a damsel in distress, a lost child, a carnivorous tree with some interesting looking fruit or any number of things.

The result of being involved in every aspect of the game in some way makes Hand of Fate 2 feel more personal and more compelling than its already very enjoyable predecessor. The fact that the Dealer comes across as such a smug git doesn't hurt either. Every time he talks about challenges of the game he is all but inviting you to make him eat his words. In addition to the cards, there are also some new games of chance in the game to liven things up. Some challenges, such as arm wrestling or jumping off a bridge to avoid being waylaid require a dice roll. These rolls allow for a set number of dice to be rerolled in case the target number wasn't met. Other challenges see the player having to choose a card from a shuffled hand of four and others still require the sacrifice of some gear.

The changes to the core mechanics of Hand of Fate 2 don't stop with cards and games of chance either. Combat has seen some serious tweaking for

The peasants are revolting, literally

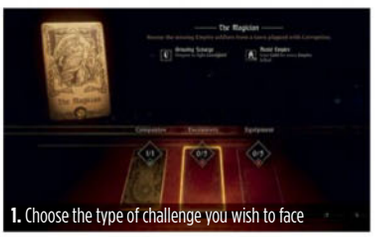
> "a damsel in distress, a lost child, a carnivorous tree with some interesting looking fruit"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You think the tarot could do with more murder
+ You like your CCGs action packed
+ You want to beat that smug git

SEQUENCE

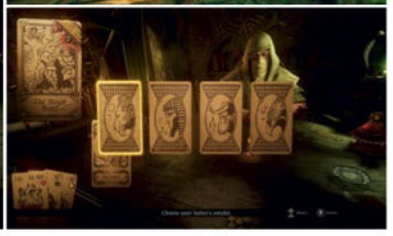
FULL HOUSE


1. Choose the type of challenge you wish to face

2. Encounter cards come with different rewards for successful completion

3. Successfully completing a challenge grants new encounter, gear and companion cards

The thieves fell the tree into the path of the unsuspecting farmers and leap out, weapons brandished.
"Give us all your food!"
1) Leap to the farmers' defence.
2) Offer to help the farmers, warning them it won't come for free.
3) Help the Thieves with their extortion.
Forest Ambush



the better and the result is a simple but satisfying system reminiscent of the Batman Arkham games. Enemies come in various shapes and sizes with different strengths and weaknesses but the core mechanics remain the same. Different enemies have better defences against certain styles of weapons - bandits can more easily dodge the hard but slow attacks of two-handed weapons whereas Royal Guards can block attacks so are more vulnerable against weapons that can easily break defences. Your inventory can only be modified between encounters so you have to choose your armaments before a fight begins. When in combat red and green indicators show what type of attack is coming. Green indicated attacks can be interrupted by hitting the defend button and red indicated attacks are unblockable so must be avoided by using the evade button. Some enemies have armour that needs to be bashed to break before you can do any real damage and other require a coup de gras to finish them off permanently. Best played with a controller, all of these commands are logically placed on the face buttons and triggers, and after only a few fights the rhythm of combat starts to feel both natural and exhilarating. Most importantly it feels fair. When you die, and you will die a number of times through your quest, it doesn't feel cheap. You feel like you made a mistake. A mistake you won't repeat when you tackle the challenge again. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

SPOTLIGHT

STACKED DECK

1. Our nameless hero fighting a zombie thing

2. Companions have special abilities to help in battle

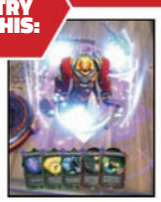
3. Life is returned between cards and for completing some encounters

4. The boss is armoured so must be bashed to remove the spiky protection

5. Doing enough damage to an enemy can trigger a finishing move. Standing close and hitting left trigger kills them instantly

6. Combo enough hits and earn a special move with your current weapon

OR TRY THIS:



FORCED SHOWDOWN
BETADWARF, 2016
- Deck building power-ups
- Grindy

BOOK OF DEMONS
THING TRUNK, 2016
- Turn based card Diablo?
- Early Access

WE SLAY MONSTERS
FURIOUSLY INACTIVE GAMES, 2017
- Card combat Rogue-like
- Looks generic

VERDICT:

A deft balance of deck building and real-time combat. Defiant Development has made an already great idea even better

9

The Evil Within 2

Bend the knee

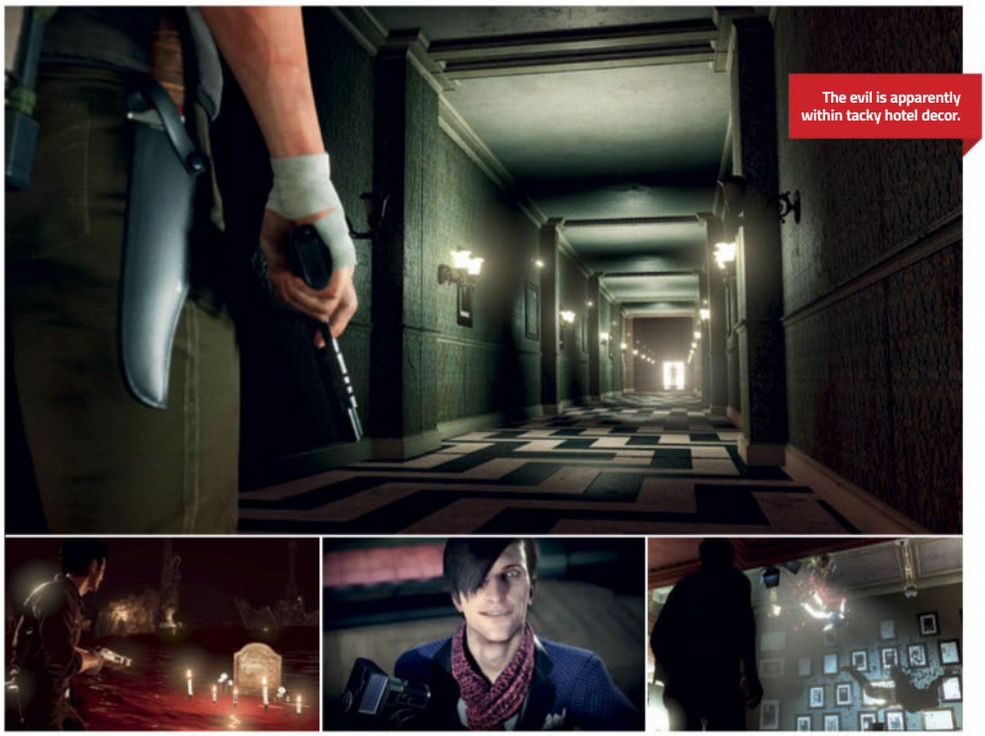
DEVELOPER TANGO GAMEWORKS • **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • **PRICE** $59.95 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
theevilwithin2.bethesda.net

We weren't particular fans of the original The Evil Within due to a number of reasons, chief amongst them being that the game really didn't seem to have a coherent direction, walking an uneasy and, in our opinion, unsuccessful like between the slow, tense horror of something like Silent Hill 2 and the action horror of Resident Evil 4 without committing fully to either style, making both the action and scares ultimately unsatisfying. There was also the revelation about STEM, partially turning the game into a case of "he wakes up and it was all a dream" copout. The Evil Within 2 still lacks something when it comes to cohesion – the first and second halves of the game are such different experiences that they could be separate projects.

Sebastian Castellanos is no more relatable or likeable in his second outing. He's still super gruff and strangely uncomprehending given that he has been in a crazy body-horror STEM world before. Castellanos may be no more likeable, but his reasoning for delving back into STEM is a good, albeit rather clichéd one. His daughter, long thought dead, is actually alive and has become the seed for a STEM world, so the ex-cop turned Mobius agent must once again face the madness of human based VR and shoot zombies and creepy dudes with incongruous voices.

The first half of the game really shows a different approach to action from the original, presenting the player with a fairly large and open world and charging Castellanos with, amongst other things, searching for his daughter using a magical communicator that can pinpoint the direction her cries are coming from. The open world is interesting at first and ripe for exploration. Players are rewarded for looking around and going through the many houses, sheds and other building, as there are plenty of crafting materials to find as well as ammunition for Castellanos' weapons. Due to the overall scarcity of ammo, stealth is really the order of the day, but thanks to some fairly oblivious enemy AI, the vast majority of enemies can be snuck past without incident, leading to long stretches of crouch walking, followed by a cutscene leading to more crouch walking. The second half of the game is more reminiscent of the original game with more tightly constructed areas and some fantastically strange locations and encounters. What the second half of the game lacks in coherence it makes up for with momentum.

Trent Haaga, the writer of The Evil Within 2 cut his teeth on Troma films and has written a number of low budget horror, comedy and action films. In many ways it feels as though Haaga included all the things in his screenplay for The Evil Within 2 that he would never have the budget to do on film. As such there's a glorious B-movie vibe to the entire affair, even though not all of the ideas coalesce. With any luck, if there's an Evil Within 3, Haaga will deliver a slightly more coherent script and the series will live up to its true potential. *TAVISH FORREST* PC



The evil is apparently within tacky hotel decor.

> "due to the overall scarcity of ammo, stealth is really the order of the day"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You like your protagonists gruff and dull

+ You prefer your princess to be in another castle

+ You like to crouch walk. It's good for the glutes.

OR TRY THIS:

OUTLAST 2
RED BARRELS, 2017
+ Genuinely chilling
− So many flashbacks

PENUMBRA: BLACK PLAGUE GOLD EDITION
FRICTIONAL GAMES, 2009
+ Exploration/puzzle horror
− Looks dated

RESIDENT EVIL 4
CAPCOM, 2014
+ Action packed horror
− Linear world

VERDICT:

A definite step above the original but still not without its problems.

7

Huge Power, Tiny Package

CHRONOS
BY ORIGIN PC

"Origin's Chronos Gaming PC, without a doubt, tops our charts in regards to performance and takes the crown even at half the size as the other contenders."

Steven Bassiri, TweakTown Editor

Configure Yours Online today - originpc.com.au

TEAM ORIGIN PC

intel inside CORE i7

NVIDIA GEFORCE GTX

VR READY

Middle Earth: Shadow of War

Warner takes cynicism to the extreme, and ruins a perfectly adequate sequel

DEVELOPER MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS • **PUBLISHER** WARNER BROS • **PRICE** US$59.99• **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
shadowofwar.com

Ever hear the one about that person? That when they're good, they're very, very good, but when they're bad, they're very, VERY, bad? Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor is basically what would happen if that person were somehow - say, by some evil wizard - transformed into a game. There are elements of Shadows of War that had me on the edge of the seat, from gameplay to graphics, but for every one of those there's an offset aspect to the game that had me by turns worrying that the increasing subterranean rotary speed of one Professor JRR Tolkien may just shove the Earth off its axis, or make me want to write very nasty letters to the publishers at Warner.

There are three distinct axes of splendid/horrid, so let's take them one by one lest the totality overwhelm me.

Story: You know what? It's great to see more women introduced into Middle Earth, and even better to see people of colour as good guys. In terms of fidelity to the look and feel of Peter Jackson's films, Shadow of War serves as a very worthy successor - from the ever evolving costume of the Ranger Talion as you lead him around Mordor and surrounds, to the architecture of Gondor and its ancient enemy, in between whose wars you find yourself. It all looks and feels straight out of the films. Even the music is great.

But atmosphere is one thing, and from the get-go, Shadow of War's story - and its main character - come across as perfunctory at best, and dumb as a brick at worst. Take the prologue, for instance, which not only introduces Shelob as a sexy goth stand-in for Galadriel (I could write an essay on how screwed up that is by itself!), but then proceeds to cover the making and loss of a new Ring of Power in a matter of moments. And its loss… Crikey,

Yonder lays the castle of my fudder

> at the start you're asked if you want to sign up to a newsletter - if you do, you'll get extra XP

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You love goths
+ You love spiders
+ You desperately need a Middle Earth hit
+ Rangers are cool

Talion is an idiot. Suffice to say it ends up on the shapely finger of Shelob, and he spends the rest of the game doing her bidding to try and get it back.

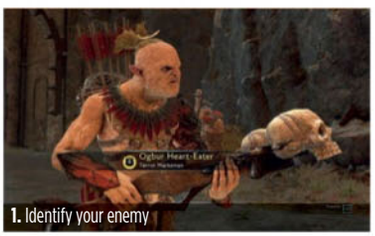
Yeah, about Shelob - I'm-a rant anyway. She is a spider - there is nothing, anywhere, to suggest that she can change shape, or is an attractive goth chick. In fact, it's taken as written that as a giant, hungry spider, all she cares about is eating and nesting - not shaping Middle Earth or chilling with undead rangers. At best, this is fan service that no fan has ever asked for; at worst, it is sleazy pandering of the highest order. And it's emblematic of a lot of other remarkably questionable decisions regarding the setting.

Gameplay: When Shadow of War works, it's amazing. When you're leaping and ghosting across rooftops before dropping down on an Orc Captain for a fight to the death in a swirling, fluid melee, it combines the best of Assassin's Creed and the Arkham Batman games. The Nemesis System, whereby Orcs that do manage to kill you grow stronger and more narratively important, is back and as entertaining as before. There's a broad range of skills to unlock, and equipment to slot in, which ensures that you can shape the way Talion plays as you see fit.

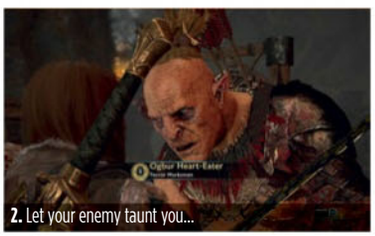
But there's also some needlessly time-wasting exercises in button mashing that would make a Diablo veteran wince. Taking down massive trolls, for instance, is an exercise in nailing a key sequence to get yourself

SEQUENCE

THE DEATH OF A CAPTAIN

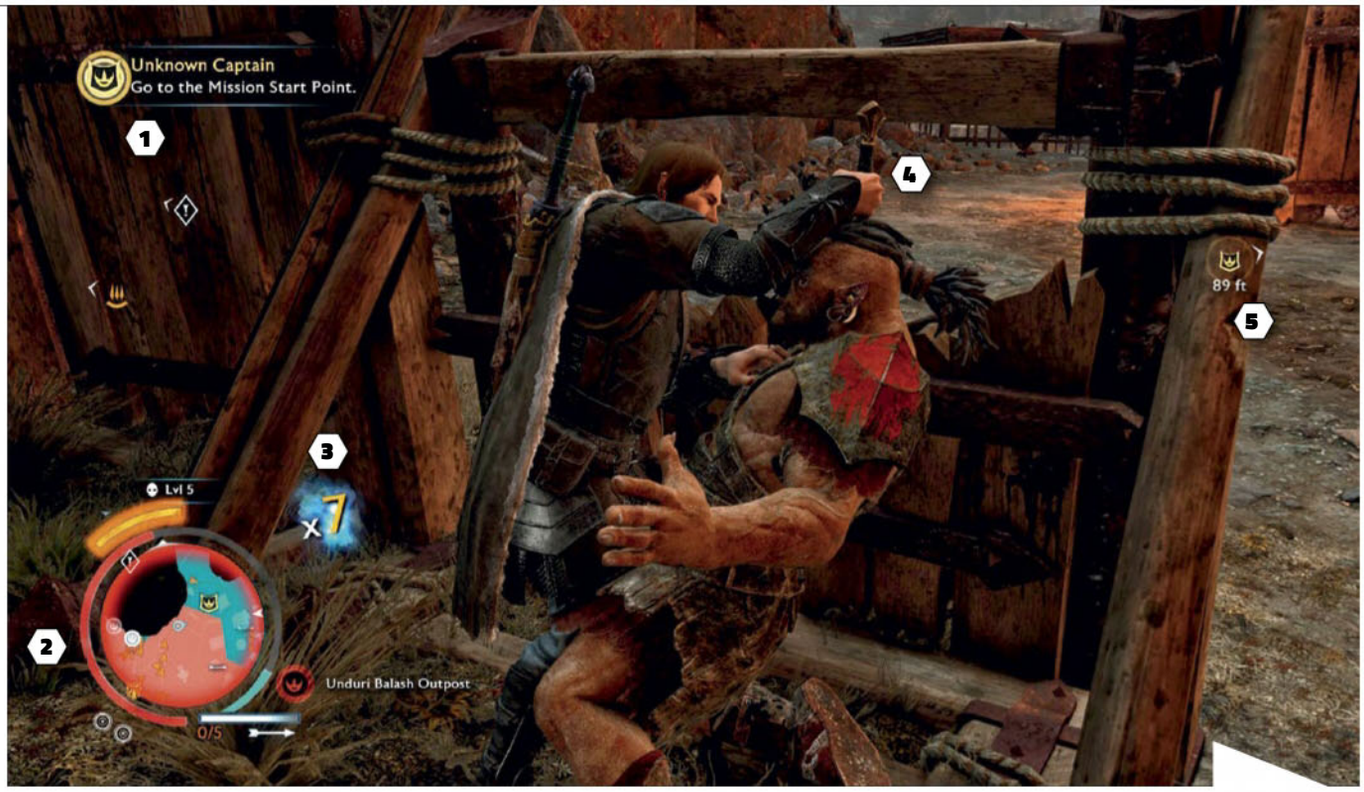


1. Identify your enemy



2. Let your enemy taunt you...

3. ...brutally murder him in front of his friends



on its back, and then just repeatedly clicking your left mouse button until the thing dies, or it throws you off so you can repeat the annoying process again. It's not epic; it's frustrating.

Paying to win: This is easily the worst, and most cynical, aspect of Shadow of War. In the late game, players are forced to either go through a tremendous time-sink slog to get to the 'actual' ending, or spend real money on loot crates that offer more powerful allies and gear to speed up the experience. But even at the start of the game, you're asked if you want to sign up to a newsletter - and if you do, you'll get extra XP throughout the game. Screw you Warner!

We all know that no matter how artistic or well-made a AAA game is these days, that it still has to make money for the publisher, studio, and maybe even some devs, but this is a stretch too far, turning the hard work of the developers into little more than a marketing ploy to fill a mail-out list, or separate desperate players from their hard earned cash. It takes a property beloved by millions, and turns it into what is basically a poker machine.

The first game had its flaws, but was by and large a great success on nearly every front. Shadow of War is a largely unworthy, uneven follow-up that can barely make a case for its own existence beyond anything other than a heartless cash-grab. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

SPOTLIGHT

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND EXECUTE ORCS

1. Your current quest

2. Probably the most info-loaded mini-map ever

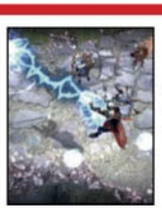
3. The current combo count

4. HEAD STAB!

5. Quest markers, in case you need to see where you should be going instead of STABBING HEADS!

OR TRY THIS:

SHADOW OF MORDOR
MONOLITH, 2014
- The better game
- Dumb as rocks ending



GUARDIANS OF MIDDLE EARTH
ZOMBIE STUDIOS, 2013
- Middle Earth MOBA
- It's not very good. At all.

LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE
STANDING STONE GAMES, 2012
- A rich MMO experience
- Looks dated

VERDICT:

At times entertaining, but for the most part Shadow of War is an exercise in frustration and exploitation

6

Forza Motorsport 7

Turn 8 out of 10

DEVELOPER TURN 10 STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAMES STUDIOS • **PRICE** $99.95 • **AVAILABLE AT** MICROSOFT STORE
forzamotorsport.net

There's not much argument against Forza Motorsport's lineage as the go to, top tier racing title on the Xbox One. It's had some competition in recent years, but in terms of manufacturer support and history, it's unrivalled. It's a vastly different story on the PC though, where Forza Motorsport 7 shares the pitlane with some of the most accurate and uncompromising racing sims available.

So there are really two ways to look at this. As a racing sim, it bares the frayed edges that have plagued the series inherently since its inception. Its tyre model often feels akin to driving a matchbox car, and its treatment of high downforce, tightly sprung race cars is also mediocre at best. But as a driving game where you can collect a huge array of cars and amass a garage the size of Jay Leno's chin, Forza Motorsport 7 remains unrivalled. The choice of manufacturers, historic cars and the accuracy with which they've been visually recreated is second to none. Don't expect it to whet your sim-racing appetite, because it falls short of that mark. But make no mistake, Forza Motorsport 7 is a brilliant driving game with stunning visuals, powerful engine sounds and wonderfully fun AI to race against.

If you're somehow unaware of the Forza Motorsport series, it's a game that has always been about celebrating the cars and their performance out on the race track. Its list of drivable cars is longer than the Nurburgring Nordschleife, and its track list is more varied than it ever has been before, with iconic circuits such as Daytona, Road America and the infamous Circuit de la Sarthe taking the spotlight.

Structurally, Forza Motorsport needed an overhaul, and that's precisely what Turn 10 has given it in Forza 7. The main campaign takes the form of the Forza Drivers Cup; six separately tiered championships, each with nine different categories to race in alongside three, single race showcase events that offers something a little different to the norm. Each category is made up of a handful of races, with your final finishing position in each contributing to your overall Cup score. Compete in enough races and earn enough points, you can progress into the next Cup tier. Simple as that.

It's a cleaner, more approachable way of leading the player through the various car classes and varieties that Forza 7 offers. From '60s Grand Prix racers and hot hatchbacks through to Group-B rally legends and hybrid powered Le Mans prototypes, it's hard to find a more comprehensive list of cars and manufacturers to pummel the race track with. It features an almost exhaustive list of manufacturers, too, with the likes of Porsche joining the fray after the expiration of the exclusivity deal that kept their cars tied up on other games.

Though where Forza 7 hits its physics sweet spot is not in the super fast, high end race cars, but the standard road cars. Getting behind the wheel of anything from the meek Ford Escort up to the beastly Audi R8 V12 feels like pure driving heaven, with the tyres screaming for grip as you round each bend if you push too hard. The way the cars lean and roll through

For boring legal reasons, Porsche is now in Forza.

> feels like pure driving heaven, with the tyres screaming for grip as you round each bend

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You like things that go *fasssssst*
+ You appreciate the technical beauty of automobiles
+ You're a fiend for top shelf graphics

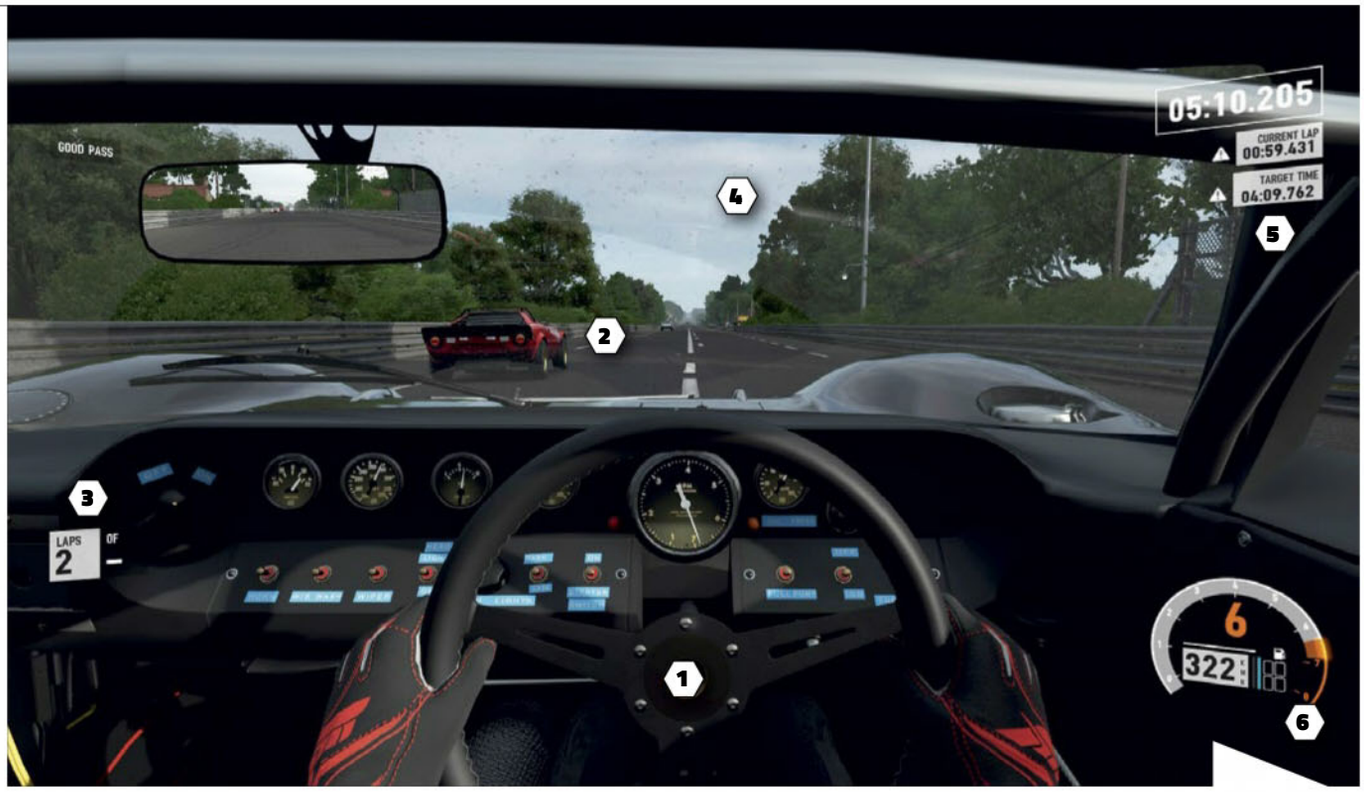
SEQUENCE

CALL ME KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

1. The blind approach to The Cutting, hug the kink to the left, then drift right to be ready for the tight left hander

2. The famous grate used as a turn in point for Sulman Park. Watch the exit as that concrete wall gets close fast!

3. The right hander at Skyline and the run down to the Dipper. Use light braking to help straight line this section.



each corner feels superb, and makes it even more noticeable when you take your car to the shop and fit it with mechanical upgrades. Add a racing suspension kit and some racing tyres to a family sedan and you can feel the difference in handling response and grip; it's excellent.

Where Forza 7 struggles on the track, and admittedly this has been the series sore point for some time now, is the bespoke race cars; the ones designed to push the limits of driver and machine. The tyres can't seem to cope with demands of high downforce, high-powered cars attacking a corner near the limit. While this can be alleviated with the use of driver aids like stability or traction control, it doesn't solve the inherent issues the tyre model has with over-the-limit grip and uncontrollable slides. There are a handful of small technical problems too, with occasional audio glitches and problems with instability, lacking a little of the polish that some have come to expect from Turn 10.

Despite some of the uproar around the inclusion of loot crates and its inherent tyre problems (which, admittedly, most people won't notice) Forza Motorsport 7 is undoubtedly one of the best looking and playing racing games around. Its tremendous roster of cars and tracks is more than enough to give a fan of cars their fill of casual racing action.

JAMES SWINBANKS PC

SPOTLIGHT

WHEEL MAN

1. Each cockpit has been faithfully and beautifully recreated

2. The AI is better than before, but will still run you over from time to time

3. Most races are under five laps, however you can elect for longer races if endurance is your thing

4. This dirt on the windscreen builds up over the course of the race

5. Forza 7's leaderboards separate clean laps from those where you drove off track or hit someone

6. This shows tyre temperature and wear and tear

OR TRY THIS:

PROJECT CARS 2
SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS, 2017
- ⊕ Driving feels wonderful
- ⊖ Bonkers AI

FORZA HORIZON 3
PLAYGROUND GAMES, 2016
- ⊕ Set in Byron Bay
- ⊖ Arcade Forza

ASSETTO CORSA
KUNOS SIMULAZIONI, 2014
- ⊕ Focused racing sim
- ⊖ Not as many cars or tracks

VERDICT:

A brilliant, detailed racing game that stays true to the series lineage, for better and for worse.

8

DVD Contents

FOOD METAPHOR

First Person Shooter (or FPS) as a genre reminds me a lot of tofu. Tofu is quite nice on its own. It's a pleasant, filling thing that doesn't have to try too hard because it pretty much is as advertised.

Now, take that tofu and add a few other ingredients. A nice ripe RPG, for example. Or a sandbox. Suddenly the tofu turns into an unexpected and amazing treat.

This month's disk has a stir-fry combination of unbelievable goodness. To appease the purists, we have the incredible Soldier Front 2 which not only is a great FPS in its own right, but also has a bunch of other modes showing off the immense adaptability of tofu FPS.

For those allergic to soybeans, we have the mind-blowing, not to be played at night (trust me!) Doki Doki Literature Club, as well as a heap of other free games.

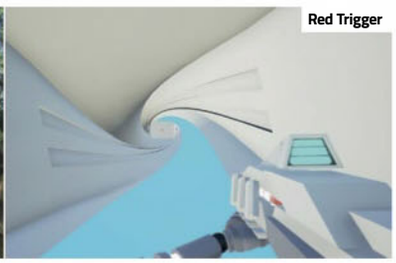
Enjoy

Nichole (Chaos Lady)

12 FREE GAMES, DEMOS & UTILS!

- Doki Doki Literature Club
- Endless Sky
- Evening Surprise
- Fistful of Frags
- Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms
- Microtransaction Simulator
- Null Vector
- Red Trigger
- Relic Hunters Zero
- Shadow Warrior Classic (1997)
- Soldier Front 2
- The Ultimatest Battle
- TinkerQuarry

Soldier Front 2



Red Trigger

Fistful of Frags

Installation instructions included on the disc. Browse the disc and launch **index.html** for more.

USING THE DVDS
PC PowerPlay DVDs are suitable for use in almost any computer but the software contained on the medium is for Windows operating systems only. Because each PC is different, PC PowerPlay and Next Media cannot guarantee the DVDs will operate as expected on every system, despite strict adherence to Windows compatibility.

LOADING
The DVDs are set to autostart. On insertion it will load the DVD's Terms and Conditions of Use disclaimer in your default Web browser. If the DVD failed to autostart, you can load the menu manually by running the file called start.htm in the root directory using Windows Explorer.

VIRUSES
These DVDs are rigorously checked for viruses during production, however, PC PowerPlay can make no guarantees to this end. Next Media always recommends that the DVDs be scanned using your own anti-virus software on first and subsequent uses.

INSTALLING SOFTWARE
Simply click the install/download link under a file's description to launch the installation program. please ensure that all other programs are closed and that any anti-virus software is disabled before performing a software installation. Due to STEAM region locking, not all content may be available toutside Australia.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT
PC PowerPlay assumes the end-user of these DVDs has the necessary computer knowledge required to operate and install software from this product, and cannot provide technical support either for this or for any of the software contained on this disc.

DVD REPLACEMENTS
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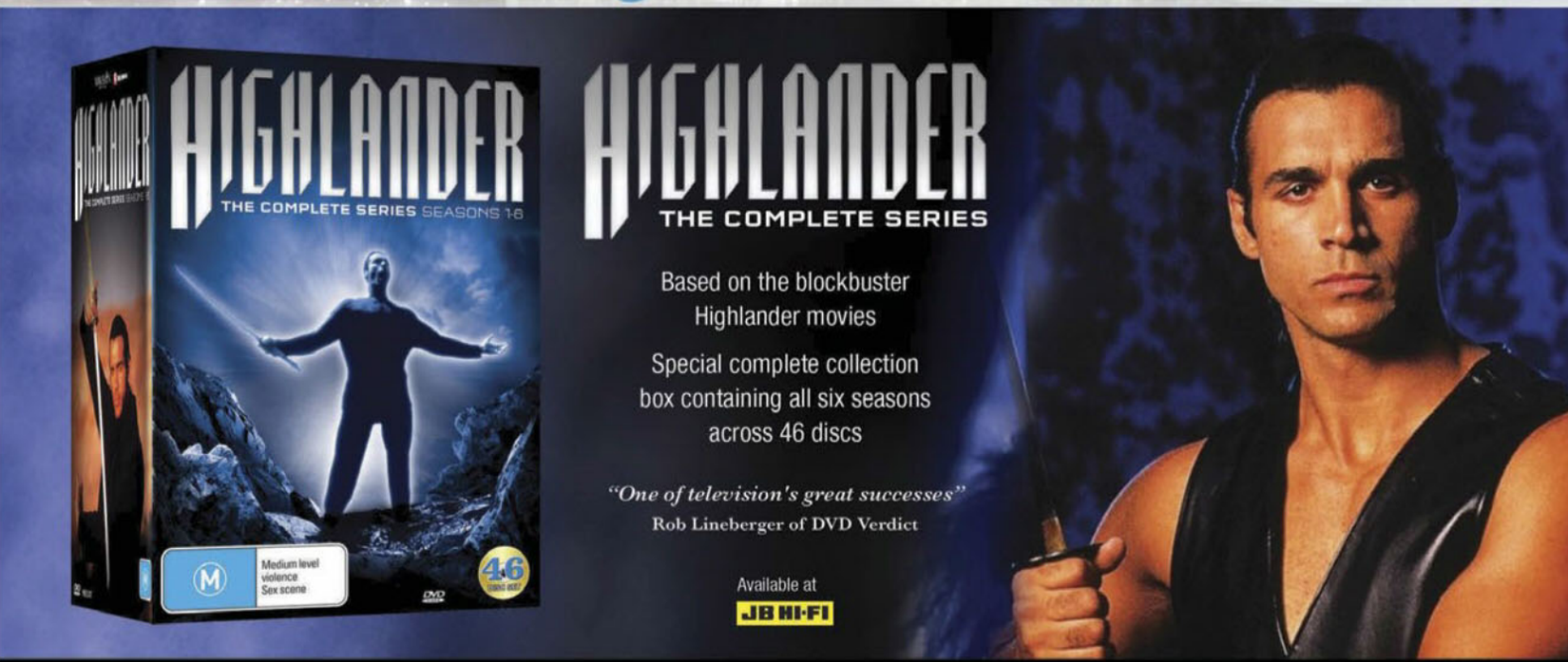

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Assassin's Creed: Origins

Stalk like an Egyptian

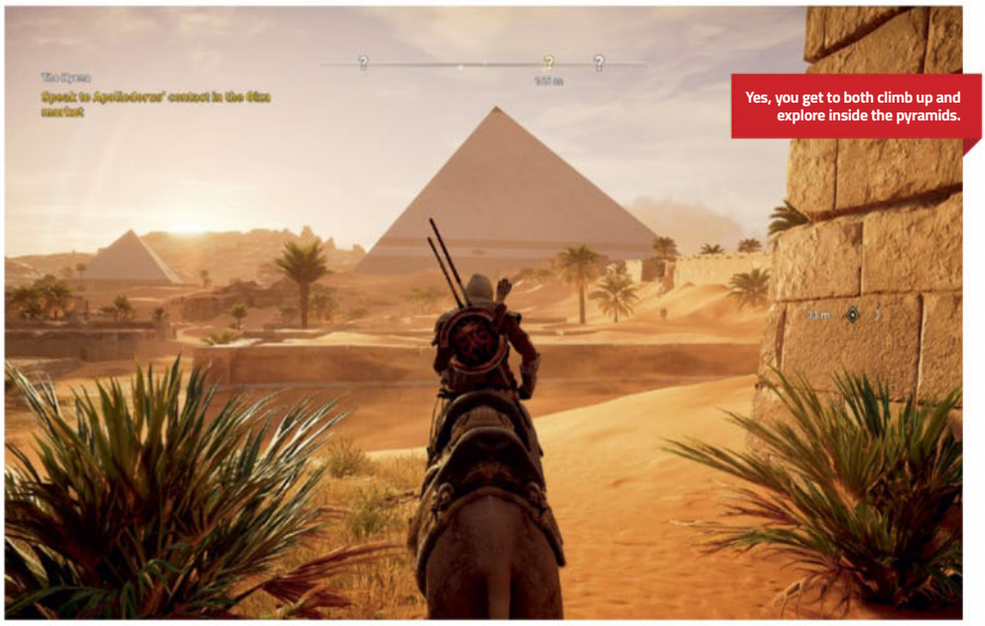
DEVELOPER UBISOFT • **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT • **PRICE** FROM $89.95 • **AVAILABLE AT** UPLAY, STEAM, RETAIL
assassinscreed.ubisoft.com

Last year, for the first time since 2008, Ubisoft did not release a major Assassin's Creed game. This was due to the poor reception to the unpolished Unity in 2014, the subsequent poor sales of the following year's much better Syndicate, and the general sense that the series had lost its way in the annual grind. The year off, Ubisoft argued, would give them time to "step back and re-examine," to refresh a series that had not paused for breath in its ten year existence. Origins is the result of this enforced break, a game that is both a surprising departure and a very safe bet. Despite its title, Origins seems less interested in where it came from and more in where it can conform to the contemporary open world genre.

The titular origins refers to the founding of the Brotherhood of Assassins in first century BC Egypt, and the roots of the order's long-running war with the Templars. You play as Bayek, a "medjay" (akin to a town sheriff crossed with a social worker) who embarks on a quest to avenge the death of his son that takes him all over the Nile Delta, from his humble home village to the cities of Alexandria and Memphis and the pyramids of Giza. Bayek is a charismatic lead, more charming than Altair and less exaggeratedly roguish than Kenway. His story sees him encounter - and quickly kill - a cast of mostly forgettable villains, but it's his relationship with his wife, Aya, a playable character in certain missions, that provides the most interesting narrative beats. They also display genuine physical chemistry when on screen together - a rare feat in games.

There is much in Origins that is new to the series, if not new to third-person open world action-RPG hybrids. During the rather abrupt opening sequence you're introduced to one of the core changes: combat. Gone is the previous timing-based and counter-attack dependent system where you'd attack someone if you pressed the button at the right moment. Here it's all about spacing, hit boxes, dodging, knowing when to light attack and when to heavy attack. It's not Dark Souls - there's no stamina management - but it means that each fight demands more from you. In one-on-one duels, where you're blocking, parrying, switching melee weapons depending on what your opponent is doing, winding up for a shield break, or whipping out your bow for a quick snipe up close, combat feels purposeful and rewards smart choices. In multi-foe brawls it feels scrappy and chaotic, the powerful elegance of the one-button-kill combo ballet of previous games sorely missed amid what often feels like haphazard button mashing.

Stealth has been overhauled, too, to the point where it's barely recognisable from the early games in the series. You can no longer, for example, blend into a crowd of people or hide in plain sight by sitting down on a bench. Now it's all about ducking behind walls and crates, staying out of line of sight, and silent takedowns with your trusty sniper bow. There are fewer hay bales to hide in, but almost everywhere you go is covered in swathes of waist-high flora that allow you to move about unseen when crouched. Field of reeds, indeed. Even when you do get spotted, it's rarely an issue. Enemies are reluctant


Yes, you get to both climb up and explore inside the pyramids.

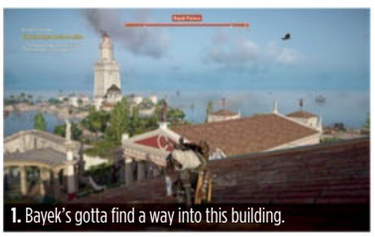
> there are fewer hay bales to hide in, but almost everywhere is covered in waist-high flora

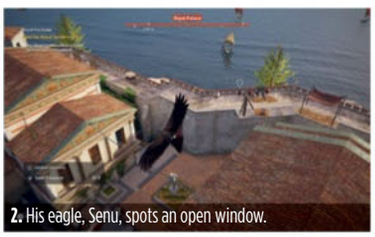
WHY SHOULD I CARE?

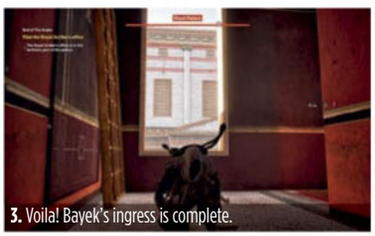
+ You never want to leave the Animus
+ You actually remember what the Animus is
+ You want to party with Cleopatra
+ You really dig the fusion of Roman and Egyptian architecture
+ You've always wanted to slide down a pyramid

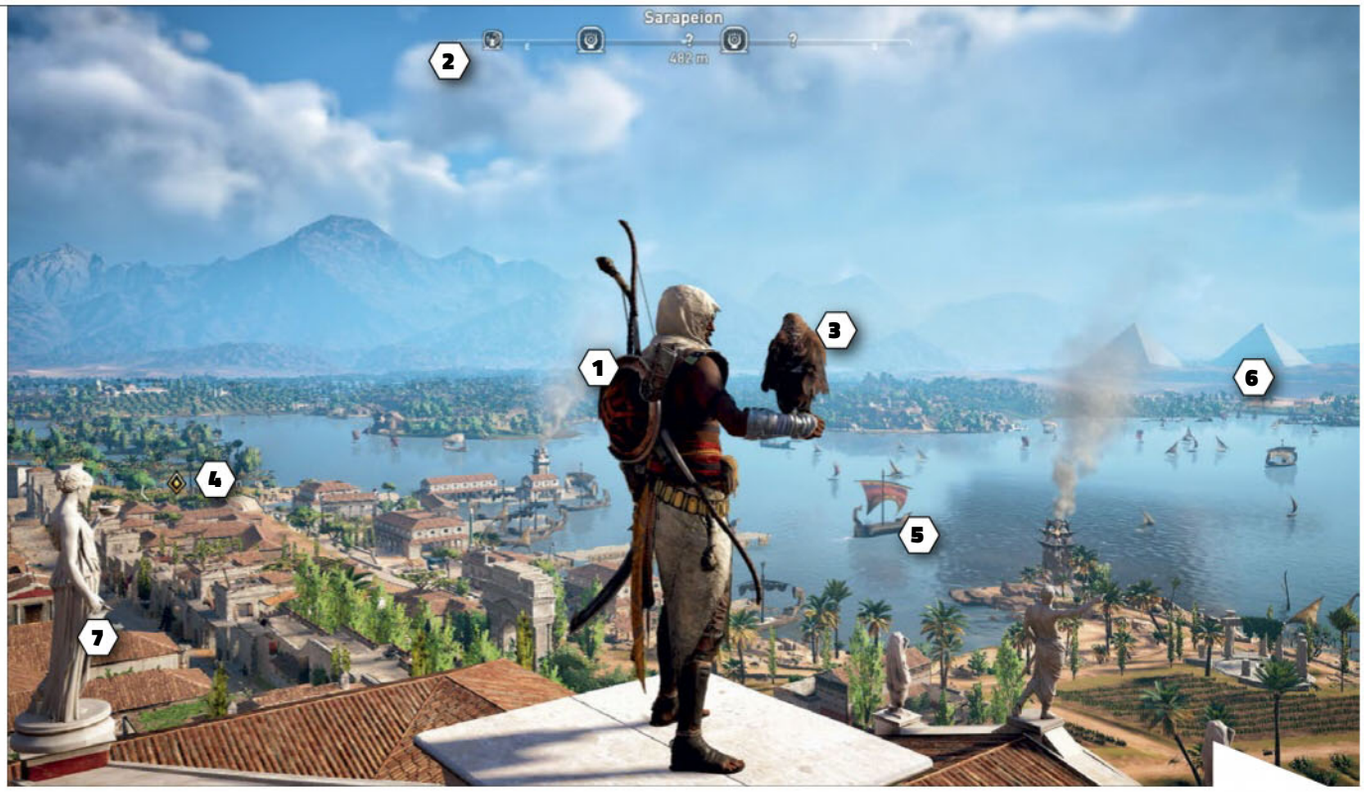
SEQUENCE

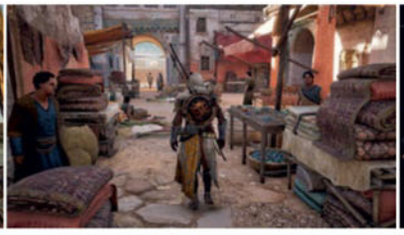
BIRD'S EYE VIEW


1. Bayek's gotta find a way into this building.


2. His eagle, Senu, spots an open window.


3. Voila! Bayek's ingress is complete.





to raise an alarm, so you can usually get away with a quick fight without alerting anyone else. And if you do have to run away, it's almost laughably simple to shake a pursuer. Most players will probably appreciate the soft punishment for failure here, but seasoned thieves will find it lacking.

The series' transition from the stealth-action of its debut to quest-stat-and-loot-laden RPG is now complete. Every weapon and shield you collect has a bunch of stats to compare. Do you want this spear that does 85 dmg with a critical bonus or this sickle sword that does 84 dmg with a combo multiplier? There are even purples and yellows and everything. Bayek has a skill tree split into three build archetypes, allowing him to specialise in melee, bow skills, or tools and traps. Or, given how frequently you level up and gain ability points, some combination of all three.

Oh yes, you level up. Regions of the map are each assigned a level range to indicate challenge. Fight an enemy that's too high a level and Bayek literally won't be able to kill it. Conversely, take on a low level foe and you'll easily one-shot it. Quests are given recommended levels, too, and you'll often find yourself pausing the main questline to tackle some sidequests in order to level up sufficiently to continue. This is likely how most played previous Assassin's Creeds - clearing all the side activities before moving forward with the story - but at least you never ran the risk you do here of over-levelling yourself. Do all the sidequests in one area and you'll find the next stretch too easy.

I didn't mind too much, though. That next section was in Alexandria, perhaps the most gorgeous looking place I've ever visited in a video game. And, honestly, that is more than enough to keep me playing Origins. Ubisoft has stripped out many of the idiosyncrasies of past Assassin's Creed games, and replaced them with tried-and-true open world RPG staples. The result is a game without too many rough edges, set in a spectacular world that you'll find easy to run around in and explore. It's not the Assassin's Creed we're used to, but it's comfortingly familiar all the same.

DAVID WILDGOOSE PC

SPOTLIGHT

WHERE EAGLES DARE

1. Bayek's got equipped a shield, two bows, and two melee weapons.

2. The minimap's gone, replaced by this Bethesda-style compass.

3. Senu, your pet eagle, is your eyes in the sky, useful for scouting any location.

4. Oh look, there's Bayek's next objective.

5. You can sail up and down the Nile in any small boat.

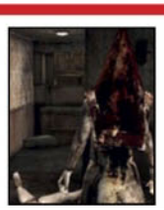
6. Just in case you forget you're in Egypt.

7. Alexandria is a beautiful city.

OR TRY THIS:

THE WITCHER 3
CD PROJEKT RED, 2015
- Choice and consequence
- It's way too cold

IMMORTAL CITIES: CHILDREN OF THE NILE
TILTED MILL, 2004
- Build the pyramids
- You can't stab anyone



SILENT HILL 2
KONAMI, 2001
- Pyramid Head
- Clunky combat

VERDICT:

Stealth-action reinvented as easy-to-digest open world RPG-action.

8

High Hell

Cocaine is a hell of a drug

DEVELOPER TERRI VELLMANN, DOSEONE • **PUBLISHER** DEVOLVER DIGITAL • **PRICE** $8.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM
highhellgame.com

High Hell is a neon-clad goofball comedy of a grindhouse FPS featuring phat beats, a twist of revenge and full frontal male nudity.

From developer Terri Vellmann (Heavy Bullets) and music by Doseone (Enter the Gungeon, Gang Beasts) this arcade shooter captures the charm of yore with an exhilarating playlist of dodge-and-shoot encounters, set across a number of rooftop compounds controlled by a cultist conglomerate machine.

Like many FPS games, High Hell's first stage allows players to find their footing in simple surroundings. But when you encounter your first doorway and are prompted with the usual 'Press E to interact', rather than a traditional opening, your foot thrusts outwards and violently kicks it to pieces. It's both silly and gratifying, and how I would describe the rest of the game.

Your mission is to assault Pitchcorp, a nefarious beer making, goat worshipping, hot-dog loving, cocaine-dealing and chimpanzee experimenting organisation, for reasons otherwise unknown at the game's outset.

Behind each kicked-down door you'll learn to expect jumpy balaclava-clad thugs, be they just hanging out, standing in the squalor of empty beer cans, celebrating a birthday, pumping iron, cooking up meth in fashionable yellow jumpsuits or taking a shower almost completely naked (the balaclava remains). Regardless of how ridiculous the scenario, each encounter is a frantic kill-fest, each more tense than the last.

This is because your enemies lock on and shoot you with deadly precision as soon as they see you, and as you're only able to sustain a few hits before dying, this presses upon you an urgency to shoot quickly and accurately.

For brand identity the dogs should also wear balaclavas

> Behind each kicked-down door you'll learn to expect jumpy balaclava-clad thugs

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You definitely want to save the apes
+ You want some of Satan's meth business
+ You fantasise about naked men in balaclavas

Your weapon in High Hell, the Soulshot, fires a single laser-like slug with precision to wherever you've directed your crosshair. Upon scoring a kill, your victim's little white soul actually flies in toward you, granting a minor health boost. You can fire off rounds quickly, but the imminent threat means you'll be more inclined to make each shot count.

In each level you're tasked with a main objective, with a dozen side objectives also coming into play. These include 'kill the dog pimp', 'collect chimpanzees' and 'rescue virgin goats', to name just a few. Naturally, these tasks complement the dispatching of several comical sub-bosses as you push toward the ultimate Boss, paintings and statues of whom you'll have a chance to deface along the way. Each relatively short scenario offers enough solid variety and enough visual gags to keep the action fresh throughout the 20-stage game.

The clear-cut but zany objectives drive you forward as you joyously blast and dodge across the tightly designed maps from moment to moment. You'll die often but get sprung back to the start of the map quickly each time, all the more determined to make it through successfully. *MIKE JENKIN* PC

OR TRY THIS:

DEVIL DAGGERS
SORATH, 2016
+ Balls hard shooting
− No Satan meth

BULLETSTORM
PEOPLE CAN FLY, 2017
+ Genuinely Funny
− Seriously overpriced

HEAVY BULLETS
TERRI VELLMANN, 2014
+ Huge bullets
− We're bad at it

VERDICT:

You'll laugh, you'll die, you'll hurl yourself back into this satanic enterprise again and again.

9

Rogue Trooper Redux

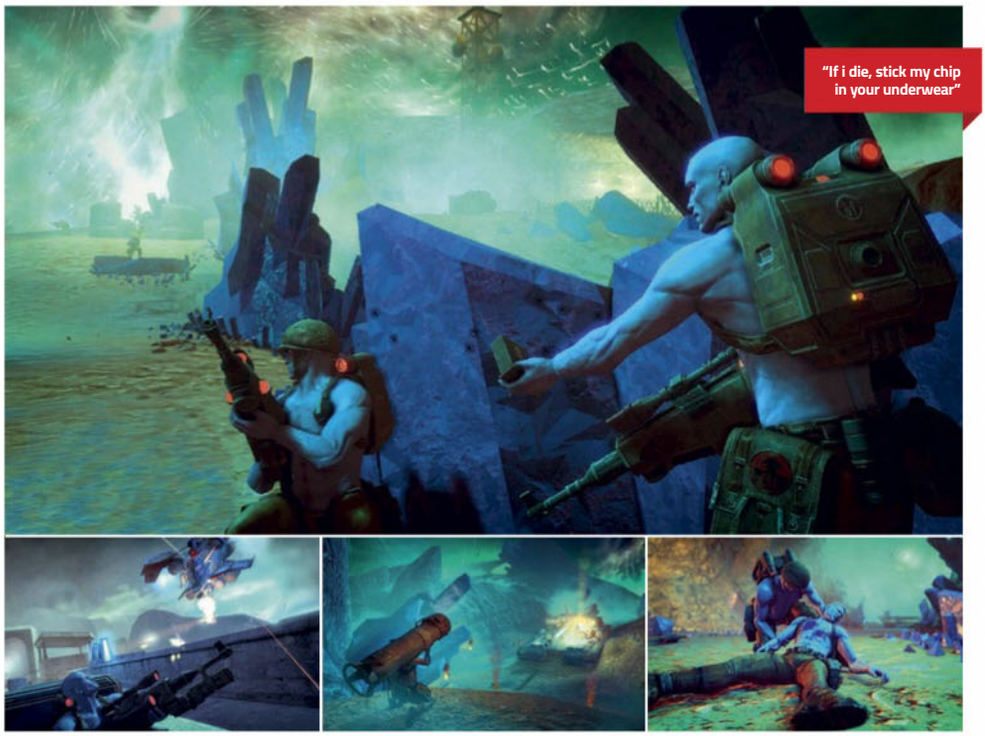
I'm blue da bu dee da bu die

DEVELOPER TICKTOCK GAMES • **PUBLISHER** REBELLION • **PRICE** $24.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM, GOG
www.ticktockgames.com

There is a fine line between straightforward and uncomplicated and dull, and too often Rogue Trooper Redux traipses over that line, taking a game that was fun when it launched eleven years ago and showing, through little more than a facelift that some mechanics just don't last the test of time. There are many games made a decade or more ago are still incredibly playable and fun, but in the case of Rogue Trooper, the lack of nuance in the shooting just makes the game feel old.

Based on characters from 2000 AD, Rogue Trooper Redux makes no deviations from the original story. On the planet Nu-Earth war is eternal. Caught in the gravity of twin suns, Nu-Earth has two vastly different poles. The Southers and Norts fight for land, resources and life, but the Southers have a few tricks that the Norts don't, chief amongst them being the G.I.s. These engineered soldiers, the Genetic Infantry, are immune to the deadly atmosphere of Nu-Earth and should be able to turn the tide of the war, but they are betrayed on their first mission and all the G.I.s are killed bar one, Rogue, who embarks on a mission of vengeance to find the Souther general responsible for betraying the G.I.s.

In addition to being immune to the poisonous atmosphere of Nu-Earth, G.I.s can also upload their consciousness's into special chips, enabling them to live on in equipment after death. Rogue is accompanied on his slog to revenge by his three dead squaddies. Bagman is in charge of inventory and can upgrade weapons and armour with enough salvage, Helm the helmet can project a decoy hologram, and Gunnar is in Rogue's rifle, helping with aim and being able to turn into a turret for short periods.



> "it would have been silly talking to Eugene the backpack, Terry the helmet and Travis the gun"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You like 2000 AD
+ You played the original and have rose coloured glasses
+ You don't like to be challenged

It's lucky that his three squaddies had those names, as it would have been silly talking to Eugene the backpack, Terry the helmet and Travis the gun. These pieces of equipment with personality are what differentiated Rogue Trooper from other third-person cover based shooters in 2006, but in today's market, a talking gun doesn't cut the mustard then the enemy AI is so dumb that they all but stand in a neat line and wait to be killed.

The lack of challenge means that you rarely, if ever need to use any of the special abilities afforded by the AI controlled equipment. In addition to the visual upgrade, the cover system has been tweaked as well, but all this really serves top do is further reduce the challenge of facing the Norts. When it first came out, I was a genuine fan of Rogue Trooper. It was a game that did something different and injected a tonne of personality into a genre that was mostly made up of tough men being gruff shooting other gruff men. Unfortunately, the 11 year gap between the first release and the facelift have seen marked advances in AI, and in today's gaming environment, a blue guy with a talking hat shooting at all but passive enemies just doesn't cut it.

DANIEL WILKS PC

OR TRY THIS:

POSTAL REDUX
RUNNING WITH SCISSORS, 2016
+ Updated graphics
− It's still Postal

BATTLEZONE 98 REDUX
BIG BOAT INTERACTIVE, 2016
+ Stands the test of time
− Pretty ugly

SHADOW WARRIOR CLASSIC REDUX
FLYING WILD HOG, 2013
+ Fun updated dick jokes
− Too many dick jokes

VERDICT:

Time is a harsh mistress, and the 11 year sleep has not been kind to Rogue Trooper

5

Elex

Gothic Industrial

DEVELOPER PIRANHA BYTES • **PUBLISHER** THQ NORDIC • **PRICE** $49.99 • **AVAILABLE AT** STEAM, GOG
elexgame.com

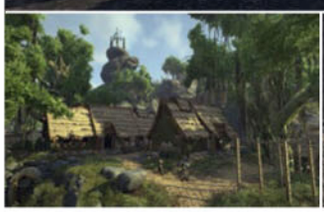
As a massive fan of the Gothic series (even the overly ambitious but deeply flawed Gothic 3), I've been following the progress of Elex for a long while, eager to see what the team at Piranha Bytes could do with European RPG design in a science-fantasy setting. The setting of Elex itself is fantastic. The world of Magalan prospered until it was struck by a meteor. Not only did the meteor devastate the planet, it also brought with it a new resource that the survivors of the apocalypse would battle over. Elex can power machines, manipulate life or generate magic, depending on how it is used. The protagonist of the game is a former Alb, a sect of humans who consume Elex so as to wipe out emotions and become creatures of cold logic.

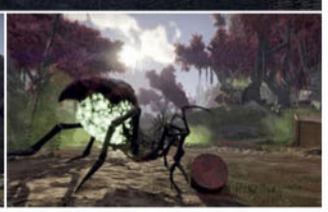
It's a great setup that leads to a truly interesting world. The four major factions of Elex have different uses for the new element and their place in the world, as well as their environments, reflect this. The Berserkers shun technology and instead use Elex to create mana which fuels magic. Their home is surrounded by lush greenery and is reminiscent of many of the settlements seen in the Gothic series. The Clerics worship the god of technology use Elex to power machines. They exist in a Warhammer 40k style techno-theocracy. The Outlaws are leather clad Mad Max wastelanders living in a desert and using Elex as a stimulant drug and the Alb are brutal military futurists using Elex to turn them into militaristic Vulcans. As disparate as the cultures and landscapes are, they fit together coherently. The world of Magalan itself is fantastic. It deserves much better than the game it got.

As it stands, Elex feels like a mass of glitches and bad design decisions loosely collected together. Combat, one of the things you'll find yourself having to engage in very often is unbalanced to the point where it feels unfair. Hitboxes don't seem to align with the mesh of the target and all too often, especially in the first half of the 50+ hour game, using the game's own flaws against it seems to be the only way to beat some opponents. As an example, soon after you start the game you are invited to go to the Berserker base. While there you can pick up a bunch of quests for gear, levelling and money. One quest involves having to kill some raptors. These critters can kill you in a single hit and there are five or six of them in close proximity. The only way to beat them safely is to use your jump pack to get to a position inaccessible from the ground and then waste 30 or so arrows on each raptor. They're easy targets because the AI can't work out a pathing option so they just stand still instead of moving away. Leave the Berserker camp and you'll face even tougher odds until you get to the point that you can steamroller nearly everything.

As much as I love the Gothic games, I can't recommend Elex. Maybe when it's available through a Steam sale and has had a year of patching it might be worth a look, but as it stands, play something else. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

Spoiler warning for Stranger Things' third season.





> using the game's flaws against it seems to be the only way to beat some opponents

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You've always wanted to pit Mad Max against Conan
+ You hate technology and worship nature
+ You hate nature and worship technology
+ You like your combat to be glitchy and unfair

OR TRY THIS:

GOTHIC 2
PIRANHA BYTES, 2010
+ Amazing open world
− Daunting

GOTHIC 3
PIRANHA BYTES, 2006
+ Huge open world
− Stunlocking

RISEN 2: DARK WATER
PIRANHA BYTES, 2012
+ Pirates!
− Buggy

VERDICT:

The world building is excellent, the game building is deeply flawed.

5

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ON-SALE NOW

Tech 268

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE

Ch, Ch, Ch, Ch Changes!

New names and faces coming to the tech section

After what seems like forever, perennial PCPP tech editor Bennett Ring is moving on to pursue other interests, so we're taking the opportunity to mix things up a bit and change the feel of the tech section. Bennett has some rather large boots to fill, so rather than bringing in a single new writer, we're instead bringing in a whole new tech team. Starting from issue 269 you'll be seeing some new names and faces getting in depth with the PC gaming tech we all love. Some of the names will be familiar, others not so much.

Anthony Agius, the man responsible for Tech News will start contributing reviews and articles to the tech section, and he will be joined by Chris Szewczyk to form the core of the new tech team. Both have years of hardcore PC tech experience behind them. In addition, Mark Williams and Peter Gutierrez will be lending their skills to section on a less regular basis. Bennett left some big shoes to fill but we think these four should be able to handle the burden.

SO raise a glass for Bennett and thank him for everything he has done over the years, and then look to the future and the new tech team. We think you're going to like what you see.

Daniel Wilks

Editor

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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87 Armageddon Black Hornet
88 Hotware
90 Inventory

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

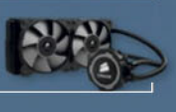
CPU
INTEL I7 7700K
intel.com.au

MOBO
ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO
asus.com.au

RAM
2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200
crucial.com

PSU
CORSAIR 850W PSU
corsair.com

COOLING
H105 CORSAIR COOLER
www.corsair.com.au



NETWORKING

Synology DS718+ NAS

Store and stream all the things

PRICE $699
www.synology.com

Synology's DS718+ is the latest update to the popular Plus Series of DiskStation NAS units. This 2-bay model is an upgrade from the DS716+II, featuring a new CPU - and that's about it really. Not that this is a bad thing, the DS716+II is a great unit in the first place, there's just not much new besides a slightly faster CPU.

The DS718+ looks identical to the DS716+II it's replacing. Two gigabit LAN ports, a USB 3.0 port on the front and two more on the rear, together with an eSATA port. On the inside, there's still 2GB of RAM but the CPU is now an Intel Celeron J3455 quad-core 1.5GHz chip that can burst up to 2.3GHz. Not a huge upgrade from the DS716+II's N3160, but Synology did give the DS718+ an SO-DIMM RAM slot, allowing an upgrade from 2GB to 6GB of RAM.

Synology claims, that the DS718+ can deliver up to 226 MB/s read and 188 MB/s write speeds in a RAID 1 configuration if LAN link aggregation is used. Due to hardware encryption support, that sort of speed can be maintained even with encrypted data. In a quick test with 2x 6TB Western Digital Red HDDs in RAID-1 there were no problems at all saturating a gigabit LAN connection on the DS718+, with sequential reads and writes.

Where the DS718+ and indeed, all Synology NAS units shine, is the DiskStation Manager (DSM) software. DSM is the operating system Synology has been crafting for years to run on its NAS units and is better than ever. This isn't a review of the DSM as such, but the latest version (DSM 6.1) has some great new features.

Top of that list is the BTRFS file system. BTRFS can auto-detect corrupted files with mirrored metadata and recover broken data automatically. BTRFS also brings incredibly useful snapshots, allowing point-in-time and instant copies of an entire shared folder, making backups a breeze.

There are literally hundreds of software packages available from 3rd parties that turn any Synology NAS into a full-blown server that can become the hub of your digital home or office.

One of the most popular apps is Plex and because the DS718+ is an Intel CPU based NAS, that means it'll run quite well. If you're already a Plex Server user, you'll know that a beefy CPU is required to handle transcoding of multiple steams, particularly if streaming video outside the home or to devices that don't support native playback of the video format in play. The Intel J3455 CPU in the DS718+ is no speed demon,

> Where it shines is with the DiskStation Manager (DSM) software

but it will handle one, maybe two (depending on the source format) 1080p streams simultaneously with Plex.

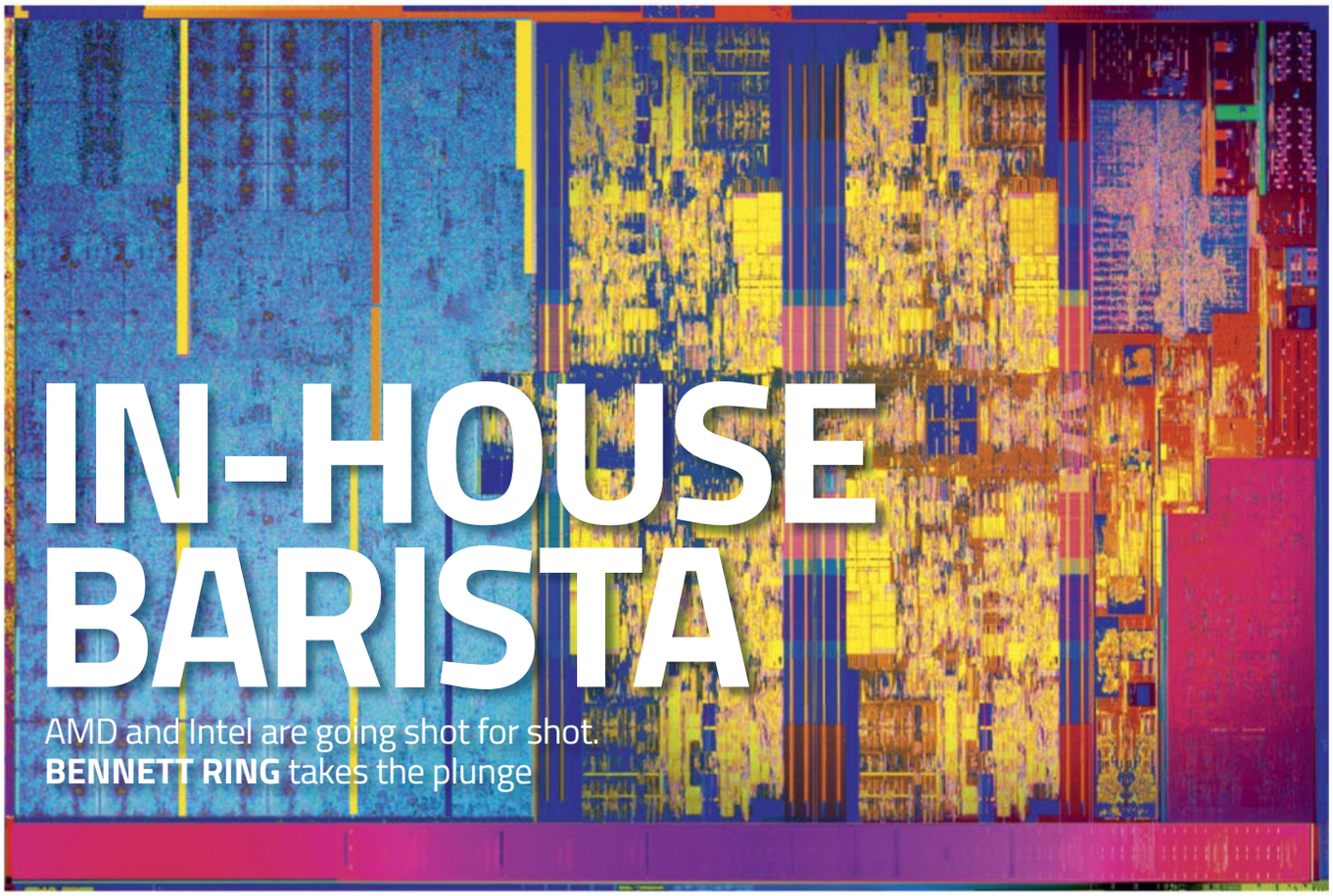
The Synology DS718+ NAS is pricier than most 2-bay NAS units, and if all you require is something basic to store backups on, you can save money by getting a cheaper ARM-based unit that'll also use less electricity. But, if you use your NAS as a home server rather than a simple file storage device, Synology's continued improvement of DiskStation Manager and the new Intel J3455 CPU in the DS718+ are a brilliant combination. *ANTHONY AGIUS* PC

+
- Excellent software
- Easy backup
- Good streaming

-
- Pricey
- Not a PLEX powerhouse

VERDICT:
A solid upgrade to an already excellent NAS

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD **10**



IN-HOUSE BARISTA

AMD and Intel are going shot for shot. **BENNETT RING** takes the plunge

In the last six months, I've seen more new hardware than I have in the last five years. This is all thanks to team Red, with AMD releasing not one, but three major new product lines. Nvidia has sat on the sidelines for the time being, but Intel has stepped up to the plate to show that's not going to take this on the cheek. Thing is, they've been forced to release products earlier than expected, such as this month's main feature – the Intel 8th Gen Core CPU. Because it's been launched early, we're going to see this chip change halfway through its generation, and the first round of CPUs aren't hugely uncommon to their predecessors. It's all very messy, and has shown that simply by supplying competitive products, AMD can throw Intel off balance. But enough about that, let's check out the latest from the boys in blue.

THE GENERATION WARS

There are six new CPUs in the 8th Gen Core range (see table below).

Formerly codenamed Coffee Lake, there's been a rather hefty price hike with these CPUs that we're not seeing overseas because... well... Australia. For example, the 8700K is 30% more expensive than the 7700K in Australia, but in the US, it's only 10% more expensive. Hopefully these CPUs follow the trend of other Aussie product releases and eventually hit the right price point.

So just what is new about these chips? As the table below shows, it's the i5 and i7 that get the biggest makeover, with another two cores per CPU. This is how Intel gets away with claiming up to a 43% performance increase over the prior gen – it will do so, provided your software is incredibly multithreaded. Software that still relies on 2 to 4 threads won't notice much of a performance increase, but there has also been a speed bump too.

Yet 8th Gen mobile uses a different architecture, the Kaby Lake R design, a refresh of last year's Kaby Lake. We mentioned the 8th Gen will shift to another architecture next year, and it's called Cannonlake. Due early 2018, its focus will be on improving IPC per core. It'll be interesting to see how Intel differentiates their names when it comes out, as it will still be an 8th Gen Core CPU. As we said, it's all a little disorganised for Intel, showing what happens when AMD throws a hand grenade into the CPU battle.

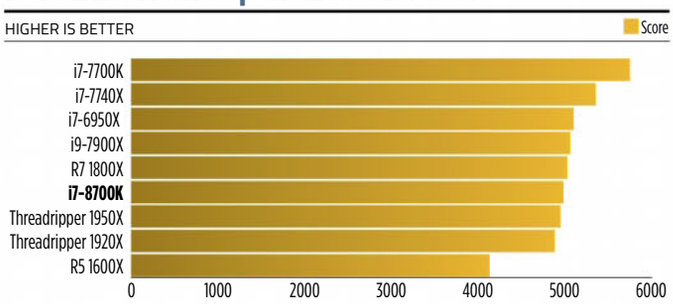
	Cores/Threads	Base clock (GHz)	Turbo all cores/one core (GHz)	L3 cache	TDP	Price
i7-8700K	6/12	3.7	4.3/4.7	12MB	95W	$589
i7-8700	6/12	3.2	4.3/4.6	12MB	65W	$479
i5-8600K	6/6	3.6	4.1/4.3	9MB	95W	$399
i5-8400	6/6	2.8	3.8/4	9MB	65W	$289
i3-8350K	4/4	4	N/A	6MB	91W	$269
i3-8100	4/4	3.6	N/A	6MB	65W	$179

TECH SPECS

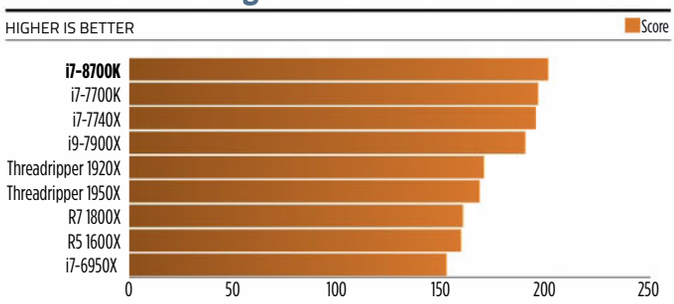
So other than an extra core, what changes have been made to the new CPU? Firstly, it doesn't appear Intel has ditched its ring bus to link the cores, using its new mesh topology to keep them connected with higher bandwidth

8th Gen Core CPU Productivity & Synthetic benchmarks

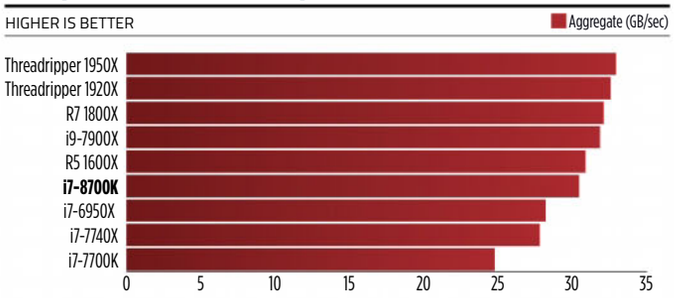
PCMark 8 Home Open CL Accelerated



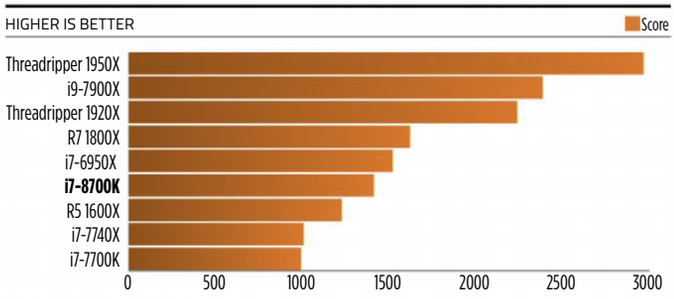
Cinebench CPU Single Thread



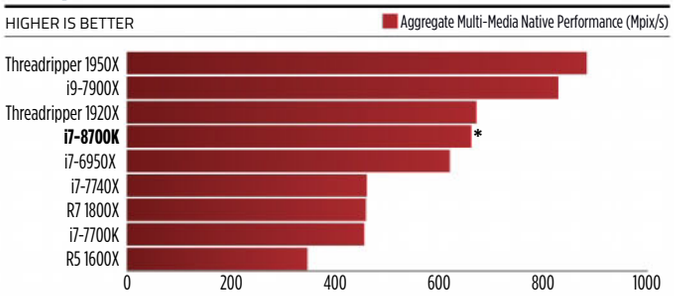
SiSoft Sandra - Memory Bandwidth



Cinebench CPU Multi Thread

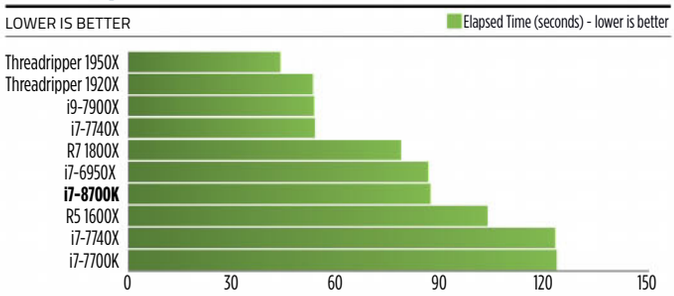


SiSoft Sandra - Multimedia

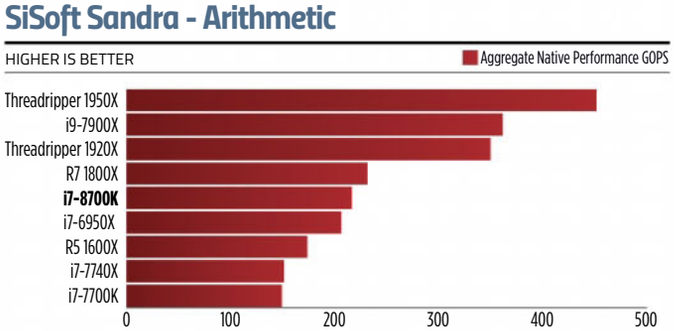


* Runs at 4.3GHz during test, 1.2V CPU voltage, 95W TDP

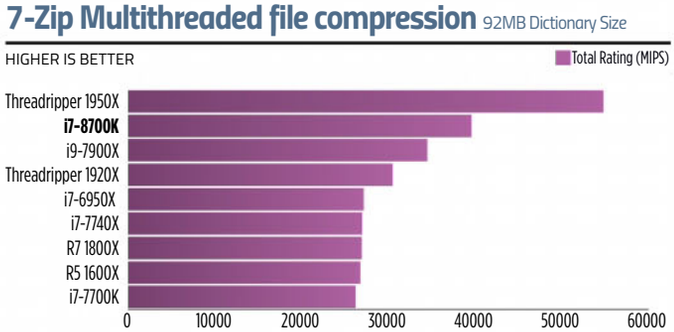
POV-Ray - Benchmark scene



SiSoft Sandra - Arithmetic



7-Zip Multithreaded file compression 92MB Dictionary Size



and lower latency – instead it's saving that tech for Skylake-X.

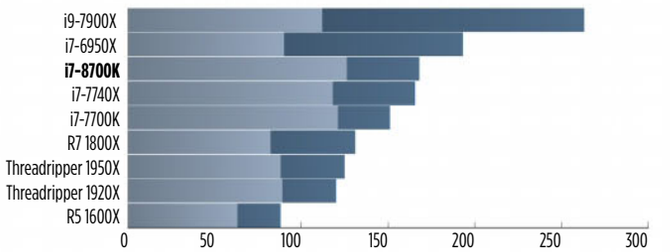
This range of CPUs was meant to be compatible with the existing Z270 platform, but at the last minute Intel changed the voltage pin configuration, requiring an entirely new chipset. This is the Z370, and the fact buyers of Z270 from a year ago now need to upgrade again totally sucks. It's a common tactic for Intel to release a new chipset each year, but that doesn't make it any more palatable. Oh well, at least your old cooler will still fit the socket, which is the same shape as the Z270. The Z370 supports dual channel DDR4 at 2666MHz, but it seems there's a shed-load of room for overclocking as you'll see in our motherboard reviews.

Overclockers will enjoy the new

8th Gen Core CPU Game benchmarks

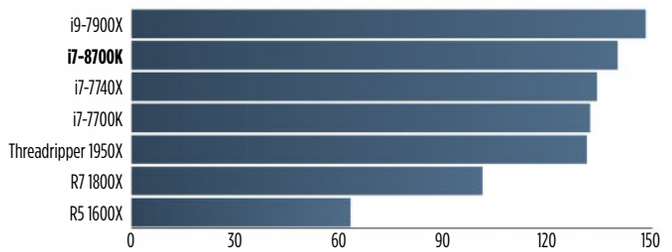
Grid Autosport

800 X 600, ULTRA DETAIL - HIGHER IS BETTER



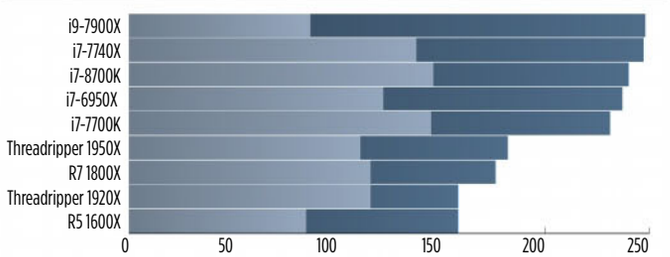
Total War - Warhammer

CUSTOM SETTINGS, 1080P, HIGHER IS BETTER



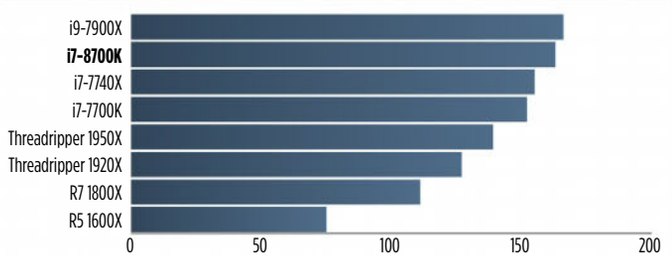
Shadow of Mordor

640 X 360, ULTRA DETAIL - HIGHER IS BETTER



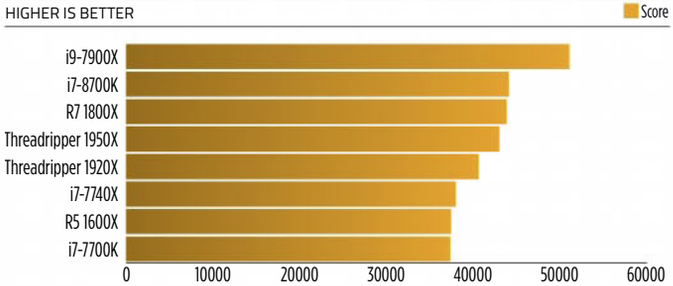
Total War - Warhammer

CUSTOM SETTINGS, 1024 X 768, HIGHER IS BETTER



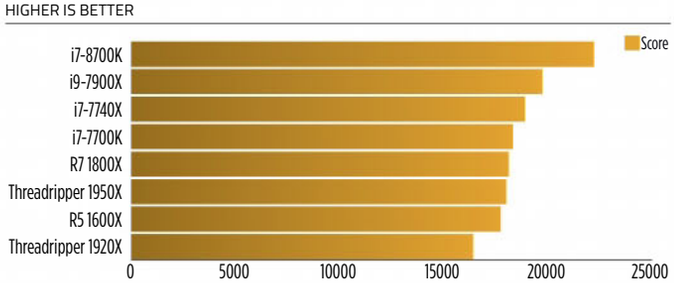
3DMark Cloud Gate

HIGHER IS BETTER



3DMark Fire Strike

HIGHER IS BETTER



K versions, which allow per core overclocking, though we've seen motherboard makers include this feature over the last two years already via the BIOS. We hit a stable 4.7GHz with our 8700K CPU and a H105 Corsair cooler. The iGPU is apparently identical to Kaby Lake but with some frequency changes; Intel has said little more about it.

In fact, Intel has been extremely quiet about the design changes to this chip, preferring to focus on "MOAR CORES!". This is why we tested the CPU the way we did; let's explain.

HOW WE TESTED

We used our normal test gear, but an Aorus Z370 board for testing. To see how those extra cores performed, we first ran around a dozen productivity tests. As you can see, those benchmarks that really use every core lost out to Ryzen, which isn't surprising given its extra core count. In fact, it even lost out to a few four core CPUs.

However, when it came to gaming, there was simply no competition – the 8700K took the win in the price bracket in every test. Those extra cores don't hurt, and we're sure the frequency boosts also kicked in.

SHOULD I?

There's no denying that that the new 8700K is the fastest gaming CPU on the planet. Only problem is that it's not that much faster than a 7700K, and you're going to need to invest at least $800+ to upgrade thanks to Intel's obsession with new chipsets. If your machine is several years old and you don't do a lot of super-threaded work, this is the chip for you. However, if you do use a lot of apps or scenarios where more cores equals better performance, we'd say stick with AMD's Ryzen series.

> "the new 8700K is the fastest gaming CPU on the planet. Only problem is that it's not that much faster"

MOBO

ASRock Z370 Taichi

Features over strength

PRICE $284
www.asrock.com

It's becoming incredibly harder for motherboard manufacturers to differentiate their products. They all pay generally the same price for the Z370 chipset, as well as many of the components on the board, such as the audio system. So just how do you make your board stand out against the rest when they're priced and specced almost identically?

A biggie is the way the board looks, and the Z370 Taichi is beautiful. The company has used a unique cog looking print on the board backed up by a cog-shaped cooler at the bottom of the board, in stark black and white colours. ASRock hasn't gone overboard with RGB lighting, and overall it's a very unique looking board.

This is an ATX board, and comes with a decent selection of PCI lanes. There are three full length x16 and twin x1, and the full length slots are all steel reinforced. Where this board shines are its storage options. There are *three* M.2 slots, though they don't all run at the full speed of PCIe 3.0 x4, with one at SATA 3 speeds. There are also eight SATA 3 ports, two more than most motherboards in this price range.

A 12 phase power design is surprising considering one of this board's biggest weaknesses – its tiny heatsinks. In fact, that's one of the board's major let-downs: it just doesn't feel that sturdy or tough. It's got a stack of features, but it flexes much more than similar boards and feels a little flimsy.

Four memory slots are included, and ASRock claims this sucker will hit DDR4-4333+ speeds if you spend the lottery on $1000 DDR4 memory. Unlike Ryzen, there's no ECC support on the Z370 chip, which is a missed opportunity, though this board is aimed at mainstream consumers.

ASRock has followed the rest when it comes to audio, using Realtek's ALC1220 codec and an assortment of high end caps, transistors and amps to improve its performance. ASRock calls this 'Purity Sound 4', and it's just as good as the rest, if not quite as clear as Asus' solution.

Sadly for tweakers there aren't any on-board buttons, so you'll be fiddling with tweezers to connect jumpers when you're doing desktop benching. There is an LCD error code readout, but good luck figuring out what each number between 1 and 100 means.

It may feel a little flimsy, but when it comes to features, the ASRock Z370 Taichi truly kicks ass in this price range. It's got more features, looks better and performance won't suffer at all. If you want a mid-range board, this is the one for you. PC

> "when it comes to features, the ASRock Z370 Taichi truly kicks ass in this price range"

+
- 8 x SATA 3
- 3 x M.2
- DDR4 4333MHz

-
- Feels a little flimsy

VERDICT:
If we had $270 to spend on a z370 board, this would be the one.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

10

MOBO

ASRock z370 Extreme 4

What the?

PRICE $259
www.asrock.com

As we've just seen, ASRock's Z370 Taichi, is a feature-packed board at a great price. Now we have the z370 Extreme, which is almost identically priced, and made by the same company. It's a mere $30 more, which is nothing in the world of IT components, so what makes these two boards so different?

For starters, it simply feels more solid, as if the mainboard PCB was built from more layers. ASRock don't list this on their specs, so it's a guess, but it certainly feels that way. This is another ATX board, and ASRock has equipped it with three full length PCIe 3.0 x 16 slots and another three x1 slots. Only two of the x16 slots are reinforced this time around though.

Once again ASRock has gone for a lovely eight SATA 3 ports, yet there's only twin M.2 slot. What the?!? And unlike competitors, there's no heatshield for either M.2 port, when we all know M.2 drives are susceptible to throttling under high load.

The design itself is rather plain as well, with a pure black finish over the board, nowhere near as striking as its predecessor. There is limited RGB support, with three different lighting zones, but again that's not better than the slightly more expensive Taichi.

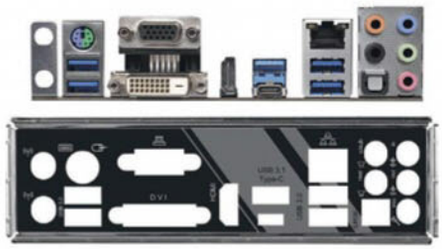
Thanks to the 8th Gen core CPUs and z370's extra PCIe lanes, there's support for both SLI and Crossfire, but again this can be found on the slightly more expensive board. Like all boards these days, the I/O cover is built in, and it hosts built-in dual USB 3.1 (one type C, one Type A). There's also a single Ethernet port, compared to the Taichi's twin Ethernet connectors. There's also no Wi-Fi, unlike it's big brother, which is yet another disappointment.

Audio is identical, using the ALC1220-based 'Purity Sound 4 solution", which is enhanced with all the usual goodies and sounds just like every other board using this codec (except Asus, who have an enhanced version).

One thing we did love is the easy to use UEFI BIOS. ASRock knows how to make it easy to find just what you need, and they label everything clearly and simply. This makes hitting the DDR4-4333MHz memory speed easier if you've got the right memory.

Unfortunately the ASRock z370 Extreme 4 is a prime indicator of the biggest issue with today's motherboards and graphics cards. They're all basically the same. We can't test them for longevity, ie run them for five years in a lab, so we have no idea about sturdiness apart from the physical feel. All we can judge these boards on is their feature set and price, and in this regard, the ASRock z370 Extreme 4 is a major failure, especially when compared to its brother. PC

> "the design is rather plain, with a pure black finish, nowhere near as striking as its predecessor"



+
- 8 x SATA 3
- Solid audio
- Feels sturdier

-
- Less features at around same cost of other boards

VERDICT:

This is a prime example of how competitive the motherboard market it, where brand is arguably more important than features.

7

MOBO

Asus Prime Z370-A

Ticking boxes

PRICE $279
www.asus.com.au

As one of the more affordable boards in the roundup, the Prime Z370-A surprisingly doesn't scrimp too much on its feature set. It's certainly eye-catching, with the black PCB offset by a white I/O cover and silver heatsinks.

Like all of the boards reviewed here, this is an ATX board, and has the usual number of PCIe physical lanes. There are three PCIe x16 lanes, with another four PCIe x1 lanes. As expected, the x1 lanes will be knocked out if you use double slot coolers, but that's par for the course these days.

A feature that seems to be commonplace in 2017 is an I/O shield that doesn't need to be fitted before slotting the board into the case, and the Prime Z370-A has one of these. It's probably a good thing, as there's a lot of inputs, comprised of twin USB 3.1 Gen 2 (one type A, one type C), DisplayPort, DVI, HDMI, twin USB 2.0, Intel Ethernet, another two USB 3.1 Gen 1 and five 3.5mm minijacks. There's also a single S/PDIF if you're optically inclined.

Asus makes a big deal about its 5 way optimisation feature, which basically overclocks the system via five different methods including stress testing and fan control. According to the Asus site, it should be possible to hit 5GHz on this board, but we weren't able to test this feature. Overclockers will also dig the onboard power switch and MemOk button, the latter of which tests your memory outside of Windows.

Speaking of overclocking, Asus also claims that DDR4-4000MHz is possible thanks to the proprietary 'Optimem' technology, even when all four memory slots are populated. There's also BCLK control thanks to the addition of a BCLK generator, a generous inclusion at this price, which should lead to higher overclocks. If you want the ultimate in cooling, there's space for a 40 or 50mm fan over the VRM area, helping to keep the power phases nice and cool, though the fan isn't included.

There's room for two M.2 drives, though one only supports SATA speeds, so you'll be losing a lot of performance. They do come with heatsinks though, and Asus claims this reduces temps by 20C under load. There's even accommodation for a 3D printed heatsink for the M.2 drives, if you've got a 3D printer handy. Unfortunately only six SATA ports are included, which is a little low. We love the UEFI BIOS Asus has used on this board, though most BIOS's these days are exceptional.

Sadly there's no Thunderbolt 3 connectivity included, but there is a header to allow such a connection.

> "room for two M.2 drives, though one only supports SATA speeds, so you'll be losing performance"

You'll simply have to buy the add-on Thunderbolt 3 header to make it work. As for audio, the Prime sticks with the tried and true Realtek S1220A 8-Channel High Definition Audio Codec, which is Asus' improved version of the AC1220 codec that everybody else is using.

It might not be the flashiest Z370 board around, but it's excellently priced and has all the basic boxes ticked off. As such, the Asus Prime Z370-A makes for an excellent entry level board for the new 8th Generation Core CPUs. PC

+
- Great price
- Great overclocking

-
- No Thunderbolt 3 out of the box

VERDICT:

A solid budget board that ticks all the right boxes.

8

MOBO

Z370 Aorus Ultra Gaming

Turn on the bright lights

PRICE $279
www.gigabyte.com.au

This is the board we used to do all of our benchmarking on, as it was first to land and Aorus have an excellent reputation for representing what a chipset can do. At $259 it's right in that sweet spot crowded by so many other boards, making it a hard sell amongst such a cluttered market. How has Gigabyte, makers of Aorus products, managed to make this board stand out?

When it comes to RGB lighting, Aorus have totally gone over the top with this board. There are over six different RGB light zones, and they can each be programmed to have a unique colour. Aorus calls its RGB solution 'RGB Fusion' and should work with the majority of RGB products on the market.

As a standard ATX board, the port design isn't crazy. We have three full length, steel-reinforced x16 physical slots, and three x1 physical slots. Gigabyte has a proprietary locking mechanism for each full length lane which it claims will hold cards more steady, but with the move to vertical GPUs in 2017 it's a bit of a moot point.

Storage whores will like the triple M.2 slots, each of which has heat shielding protection, though there are only six SATA 3 connections. We do love the various buttons on the board for rebooting, powering up, clearing the CMOS and such, which makes it about a gazillion times easier to work on in an open work bench environment.

Twin Gigabit Ethernet is also appreciated, though the lack of Thunderbolt 3.0 is a bummer. There is a header for it, but you'll need to buy the optional card to connect to this header. Once again we see the ALC1220 audio codec wheeled out for duty, with various upgrades basically identical to the competition. Aorus calls its solution the 'Amp-up' solution, yet lacks the ability to swap out amps like its higher range motherboards.

I/O options are thorough, with DisplayPort, HDMI, USB 3.1 Type-C and twin USB 3.0 Type A on the I/O panel. There's also five 3.5mm sound outputs if you're running something less archaic than an AV receiver through HDMI. Aorus' excellent graphical bios should make overclocking a breeze, and it rates the memory slots to DDR4-4333MHz+.

So once again we see a typical laundry list of features, interchangeable with basically every other z370 motherboard in this price range. It's not that this is a bad board whatsoever; it's that most other z370 boards in the same price range aren't either. It's not as feature packed as the ASRock board, but it does feel a little more sturdy. Ultimately though, your buying decision will probably come down to brand preference. PC

> "when it comes to RGB lighting, Aorus have totally gone over the top with this board"

+
- Lotsa lights!
- Sturdy build

-
- Just like the rest

VERDICT:
There's nothing here to make this stand out from the rest, making it merely average at best.

7

MOBO

MSI Z370 Gaming Pro Carbon AC

Finally, something different

PRICE $349
www.msi.com.au

I was just about to shoot myself after watching Full Metal Jacket and having to do yet another motherboard review of a product that is just like every other board until this sucker came along. At $349 it's substantially more expensive than the competition, so I expected to see some major innovations or new features. I'm not so sure I ended up seeing what I wanted.

Like Gigabyte's Aorus brand, MSI's boards are all about the RGB. If you want your gaming room to look like a laser testing facility, this is the board for you. Mystic's version of RGB is called 'Mystic Lighting', and it does up to 16.8 million colours.... Like every single other board on the market using RGB lights. Like the Gigabyte Aorus board, it's compatible with most third party RGB solutions.

One thing instantly noticeable is how much denser and more coverage the power phase and southern heatsinks are. It's night and day compared to the other boards, which suggests this product will handle higher heat more ably, which equals higher overclocks. Speaking of which, this board doesn't have MSI's OC wheel, nor does it have any onboard buttons for rebooting, powering up, etc. When $100 cheaper boards have this, it's a strange omission.

Yet again we see this being a standard ATX board, this time with three full length x16 physical lanes (two steel reinforced) and three x1 physical lanes. Yep, identical to the others basically. There are two full speed PCIe 3.0 x4 M.2 slots, one of which comes with a nice chunky heatshield (this is the slot closest the main PCIe x16 slot for your GPU, so it makes sense to keep things chillin'). There are six SATA 3 ports, but oddly two of them are front facing, rather than along the side like the other ports.

The four memory slots are rated to handle a maximum speed of 4000MHz, 300MHz less than other boards, though we think they'll all hit around the same speed when tweaked properly. There's just a single Ethernet port, but this is the only board to include integrated 802.11ac Wi-Fi. Is that really worth the extra $80 though?

You can guess which audio codec this board is using already – the ALC1220 used by every other board in the roundup. Yep, it's been beefed up, but this time is called 'Audio Boost 4'. It sounds just the same as the others, with one exception. The inclusion of Nahimic 2+ software definitely gives it a better virtual surround sound experience than the other boards.

> if you want your gaming room to look like a laser testing facility, this is the board for you

Other than that though, this board seems pretty much identical to the others with the addition of Wi-Fi and removal of several SATA and M.2 ports. It does feel physically built better than the others, but not to the point we'd spend $80 more. PC

+
- Solid build
- Lots of shiny lights
- Great heatsinks

-
- Overpriced

VERDICT:

Even when you jump the price $80 it's still hard to make a difference, and MSI hasn't done enough here to justify the leap.

8

MONITOR

AOC AG271UG

Excellent colour, hefty price

PRICE $1,089
www.aoc.com

AOC used to be known as entry-level players, but the AOC AG271UG shows those days are long gone. At over a grand, it's certainly aimed at the higher end of the market, but with 27in displays starting at $249, is a 400% price rise worth it?

Let's start with the exterior. The stand is easy enough to install, and is fully adjustable in terms of height, angle and swivel. The bezel is rather thick, unlike the slick edge to edge screens we're used to at this price. There's also a surprising lack of inputs, with a single HDMI 1.4 and DisplayPort 1.2. Instead AOC has focused on USB connectivity, with four USB 3.0 ports, one of which can be used for charging. So far, it's not looking great for this display. But then we come to the tech specs and performance.

Firstly, it's a 4K panel. To be frank though, we feel 2560 x 1440 is the ideal sweet spot for monitors of this size; 4K just feels too small, especially as some applications don't support scaling.

The second stand out feature is that AOC has managed to make this IPS display run with a tiny 4ms pixel response time. And yet the refresh rate is limited to 60Hz, well below what we'd expect for a monitor of this price. The inclusion of G-Sync does go some way to offset this, but we'd really have liked to see at least a 75Hz refresh rate. It performed beautifully in motion blur tests despite the low refresh rate.

Where this panel really shines is its colour accuracy. If you're looking for professional grade colour accuracy, this display has you covered. It seems strange for AOC to focus so heavily on colour accuracy when this display is obviously aimed at gamers, and it doesn't have support for any of the new HDR technologies, unlike some screens available at less than half the price. Unfortunately it didn't do so well when it came time to test contrast, lagging far behing what we'd expect from a monitor in this price range.

We're at a bit of a loss with this display. The colour accuracy is absolutely impeccable, but when it comes to features for the price it is heavily beaten by many of the monitors we looked at last issue despite them being valued at half the price. Despite it being aimed at gamers, we feel this screen is actually better for professionals in the video or image editing industry given its amazing colour accuracy. But if you're looking for a good gaming monitor, you can get something much better at just half the price.

BENNETT RING PC

> "Where this panel really shines is its colour accuracy."

▶ **AOC has maxed-out USB connectivity, but fails to provide more than a single HDMI and DP input**

+
- Amazing colour accuracy
- No motion blur
- 4K

-
- Average contrast
- Pricey
- Lacking in connections

VERDICT:
Incredible performance that comes at a hefty price

6

MONITOR

Philips 276e7

Cheap but not nasty

PRICE $249
www.philips.com.au

Yes, that price is indeed correct. It's now possible to buy a 27in display for less than $250, even if it is only a dollar cheaper. If you're looking for the cheapest possible 27in display on the market, look no further. Now, obviously there are going to be serious compromises when you're paying so little for so much screen real estate, but still, that's a damn fine price for somebody who wants a basic 27-inch screen.

The first trade-off is the stand. To be blunt, it's horrible. There's no height or swivel adjustment, with only tilt adjustment included, from -5 to 20 degrees. This means it's impossible to position it at the right height, and you'll have to sit directly in front of the display unless you enjoy neck cramps. The old bezel design is present, rather than the edgeless designs becoming more common these days. Inputs are decent for this price, with a single HDMI, DVI-I and VGA.

Secondly, it's a mere 1920 x 1080 resolution, which as we've said before is a little too low for a 27in screen. It's not unusable, but the difference in crispness and clarity between 1080p and 1440p is very obvious at this screen size. As expected, the maximum refresh rate is 60Hz, and there's no sign of the likes of FreeSync or G-Sync. However, the panel does include flicker-free backlight technology to lower eye fatigue. To keep prices down, the Philips 276e7 uses a PLS LCD panel. This technology was intended to be a competitor to IPS screens, but never really took off, even though it has several benefits such as higher brightness.

Philips claims a contrast ratio of 1000:1, but our testing showed just a quarter of this, at 268:1. This could be because we disabled the dynamic contrast ratio setting to find out the true native contrast ratio. Philips claims the pixel response time is 5ms Grey to Grey, though given the contrast ratio results we're not so sure whether to believe this. It also not great for colour accuracy, yet remained under the threshold of three during our average colour accuracy test after calibration, which means it's still fine for relatively accurate colour coverage. Surprisingly, this cheap monitor has one of the easiest to use OSDs we've seen, thanks to a small joystick on the rear of the monitor.

We may have pointed out a lot of flaws, but at the end of the day this is a perfectly usable 27in display for a meagre $249. Our biggest issue is the stand, but other than that, this is the cheapest way to enter the land of 27in screens. *BENNETT RING* PC

> It's now possible to buy a 27in display for less than $250, even if it is only a dollar cheaper

You will have to make do with just one VGA, DP and HDMI input

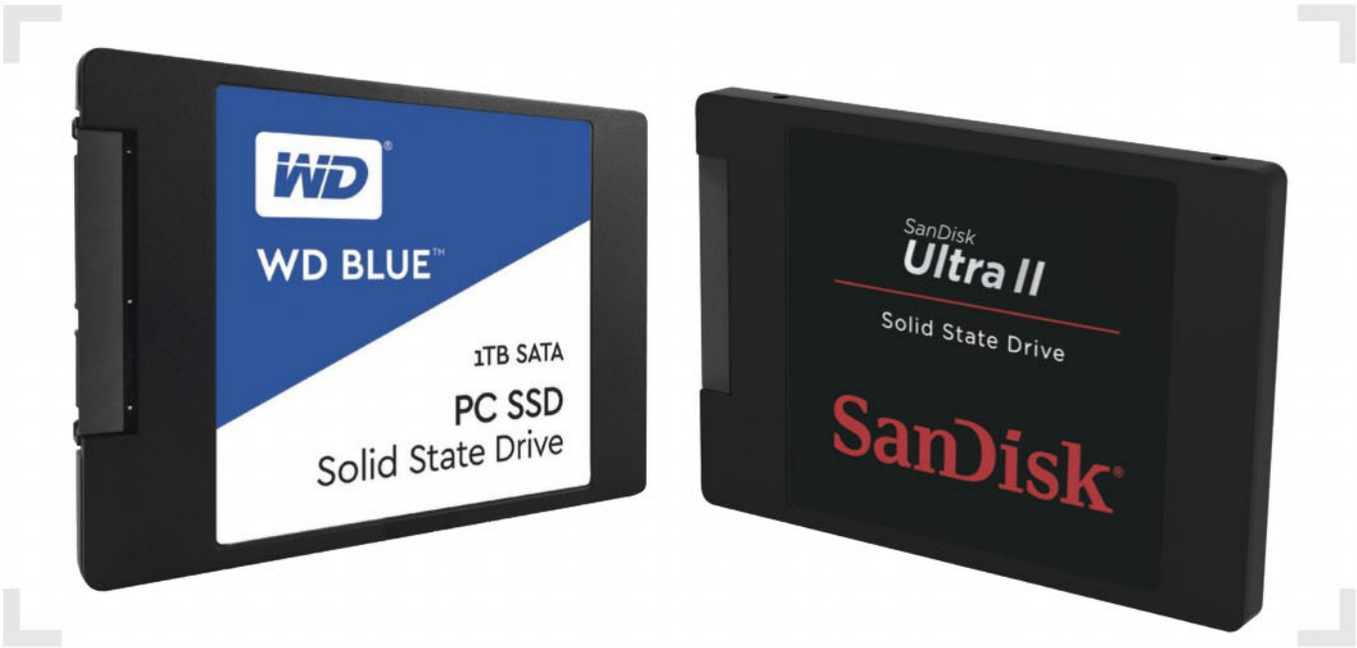
+
- Amazing price
- Good brightness
- Excellent OSD

-
- Horrible stand
- Only 60Hz
- 1080p

VERDICT:

It's not the best 27" monitor by a long shot, but for the price it's hard to beat

8



STORAGE

WD Blue 3D & Sandisk Ultra 3D 1Tb SSDs

Same same but different

PRICE $480
www.wdc.com • www.sandisk.com

You might wonder why we're testing two solid state drives in the one review? Well, it's because WD is being a little tricky with its marketing for these two products. The WD Blue 3D range of drives is aimed at resellers and system builders, while the SanDisk Ultra 3D drives are being marketed to gamers and creative types.

The fact remains that under the marketing and stickers, the hardware in these new 3D NAND-powered SSDs is identical. Pricing isn't, however, so it's worth shopping around to make sure you get the cheapest drive available at the capacity you're looking for. And, it is worth the effort, because both drive ranges offer a compelling mix of capacity, performance, and value.

3D NAND has been on the market for about a year, but the 64-layer revision in these drives that makes a serious impact – these are in fact the first SATA SSDs with the hardware. At time of writing, they're available in sizes from 256GB up to 1TB, but future releases will go up to 2TB, and be available in the M.2 form factor. The big difference between 2D and 3D NAND is that the former suffers a serious performance hit during sustained write activity. With these drives' Marvell 88SS1074 and 64-layer 3D NAND, both make full use of the SATA interface – large files will not slow down these drives.

Both the WD and Sandisk drives come with a three-year warranty, and both come with free SSD Dashboard software – but the software will only work with the drive that comes with it. The software's handy though, letting you monitor hardware performance, safely delete date, and manage disk space.

The 1TB drives on test both offer a promised sequential read/write speeds of 560/530MB/s, but testing came in a little lower – CrystalDiskMark delivered a sequential read speed of 530MB/s, and a sequential write of 520. Performance difference between the WD and Sandisk models is negligible. This is solid performance, but even better when you stack it up against one of the better considered storage products on the market today, Samsung's 850 Evo. Both the WD Blue 3D and the SanDisk Ultra 3D products are only a little slower than Samsung's drive. However, while a lot of overseas reviewers are praising these new drives for their superior price point, the opposite is true in the Australian market. In the US the difference is stark – the 1TB WD Blue 3D retails for around $US280, compared to the Evo's $US340. Here, however, the numbers aren't so attractive, with the 1TB WD Blue 3D retailing for $479, and the similarly sized 850 EVO costing builders just $435.

> under the marketing and stickers, the hardware in these new 3D NAND-powered SSDs is identical

It's odd enough that these two drives are practically identical, with the only difference being the marketing behind them, but given the Samsung 850 Evo does have the slightest performance edge, and the better local pricing, it remains the SSD of choice for us. Future price drops may make these more desirable, but for now, they just don't quite make the cut in a very competitive market. *DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

+
- Great performance
- 3D tech
- Good software

-
- Too expensive

VERDICT:
Two drives, identical specs, great performance...but price disappoints

6

XXXXXXXXX

Armageddon Stealth Raptor MKA-7

Deceptively subdued

PRICE $249.95
www.impactsystems.com.au

Despite the aggressively militaristic/sci-fi name, the Stealth Raptor is actually quite an understated keyboard, eschewing the frills and blinking lights of the high end gaming keyboard market. It's a fairly basic looking slab of black plastic without much in the way or ornamentation or excess aside from two selector buttons and a dial to control the intensity of the backlighting or volume situated above the numpad. The Stealth Raptor also features both USB and audio passthrough to minimise cable clutter. Under the hood, the keyboard sports real Cherry MX switches from the most popular colours – Red, Blue, Brown and Black - (our review version featured the pleasantly firm linear Black switches) as well as variable polling rates.

The backlighting is kept nice and simple with a proprietary blue for most keys but an orange/yellow for WASD, space, Esc, and the arrow keys. You can switch between a few modes with the selector dial, but with the subdued colour scheme, anything aside from bright makes the keys look blank. The only real problem with the Stealth Raptor is how conservative the design actually is. It's a pleasant to use keyboard, but without all the bell and whistles of high end keyboards, such as RBG backlighting and dedicated macro keys, it's hard to justify the rather high price tag. The media and lighting switches as well as the dial feel quite flimsy as well, like they come from a very different product.
DANIEL WILKS PC

+	• Feels good • Simple lighting • USB and audio passthrough
-	• Flimsy AV buttons • Expensive

VERDICT:
A good solid keyboard with some nice features but prices too high for its place in the market.

8

XXXXXXXXX

Armaggeddon Black Hornet MKA-3

Boxy, but good

PRICE $189.95
www.impactsystems.com.au

The Black Hornet MKA-3 is essentially the little brother of the Stealth Raptor keyboard. It features a very similar design, the same range of Cherry MX keys (again our review version came with the pleasantly firm but linear Cherry Black switches) and the same blue and yellow lighting - blue for the majority of keys and yellow for WASD, space and arrows. Where the two keyboards differ is the fact that the Black Hornet features a tenkeyless design and ships with a large, comfortable wrist rest. For our money that makes the Black Hornet the clear winner of the two Armaggeddon keyboards we've tested.

THe smaller footprint of the Black Hornet both makes the keyboard a more attractive option for cluttered desks, but it also serves to make the keyboard feel sturdier. The Stealth Raptor is a vell put together peripheral, but there is a bit of flex in the body. That's not the case with the Black Hornet. It feels rock solid no matter how heavy you are on the keys. The Black Hornet features most of what you would expect from a gaming keyboard, with six macroable keys, adjustable key response time and built in memory for macro storage.

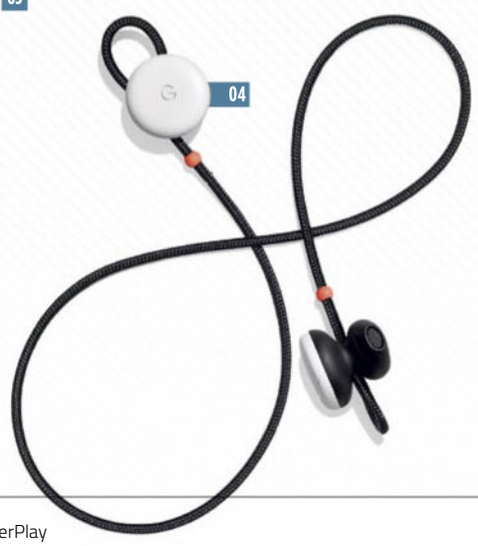
All in all the Black Hornet is a great little gaming keyboard, but unfortunately, like the Stealth Raptor it's also rather pricey. THough not as overpriced as the Stealth Raptor, at $189.95, the Black Hornet is $30-$40 more than comparable tenkeyless gaming keyboards on the market.
DANIEL WILKS PC

+	• Well built • Appealing no-frills design • Feels great
-	• Too expensive

VERDICT:
An excellent, comfortable and well built tenkeyless gaming keyboard with too high a price tag.

8

HOTWARE 268
with Terrence Jarrad



01 The C64 Mini

$120 ▪ Retro Games
www.thec64.com

Forget the NES and SNES classic, if you want to go retro, do it properly, with this licensed and minified to 50% scale replica of the C64.

POWERED UP: 720p HD output over HDMI to recreate that 4:3 resolution on your huge OLED – there's even a CRT filter to give it a more authentic look. Classic joystick comes with the unit, and there's a second USB port ready for another. 64 games built in, including the likes of Paradroid, Speedball, California Games, and Impossible Mission.

PLAYED OUT: If you want to get your hands dirty in BASIC, you'll need to plug in a USB keyboard - the keys here are just for show.

02 Skywalker X-Wing Shoes

$410 ▪ Musterbrand
www.musterbrand.com

Napa leather shoes (with rubber sole) modelled after Luke's X-Wing pilot outfit.

POWERED UP: Just like the light of a new day these shoes hit us from out of the blue, breaking us out of the spell we were in, and making our wishes come true.

PLAYED OUT: Believe it or not, that price is quite high. We never thought it could be so much. 400 bucks for a new pair of kicks, no matter how clutch, it's out of our price-range and such.

03 Google Pixel 2

$1079+ ▪ Google
store.google.com

The deal with Google's phones has always been the rawest and best Android can be, without the bloat that third party sellers like to add (Hi Bixby!), and the latest entrant is no exception.

POWERED UP: The usual techno-wizardry. Snapdragon 835 processor, 4GB RAM, 64 or 128GB storage.

PLAYED OUT: When you own a pair of noise cancelling headphones that you wear every single day, and the phone you want doesn't have a headphone jack, you think twice about whether you want that phone. Also there are a number of reports of screen burn-in occurring on XL devices. Probably wait a bit to see how that pans out.

04 Google Pixel Buds

$249 ▪ Google
store.google.com

These things are pretty neat. Wireless. Fast charging via its case for a 5 hour power burst. Integration with Google assistant so you can tell your phone to do stuff without needing to touch it. Touch and swipe controls on the buds themselves.

POWERED UP: The introduction of the Pixel Buds was some straight up sci-fi stuff. Real-time language translation demonstrated live. Here's the first step towards our universal translator, our Babel fish. Amazing.

PLAYED OUT: They're a little big, and a little ugly.

05 Lego Millennium Falcon

$1299 ▪ Lego
shop.lego.com

In case you're wondering, this is what 7,500 pieces of absolute glory looks like. It's said that Lego is for all ages, but that's not really true because this is absolutely not for kids. They won't appreciate it. So lock yourself away with the Kragle when you build it.

POWERED UP: Classic crew minifigs, new crew minifigs, and a cockpit with detachable canopy. Iconic areas from the movies like the hidden floor compartment, Dejarik holo game board, and gunnery station, to help you recreate your favourite Star Wars scenes.

PLAYED OUT: That price. Ouch. *cough* Lepin *cough*.

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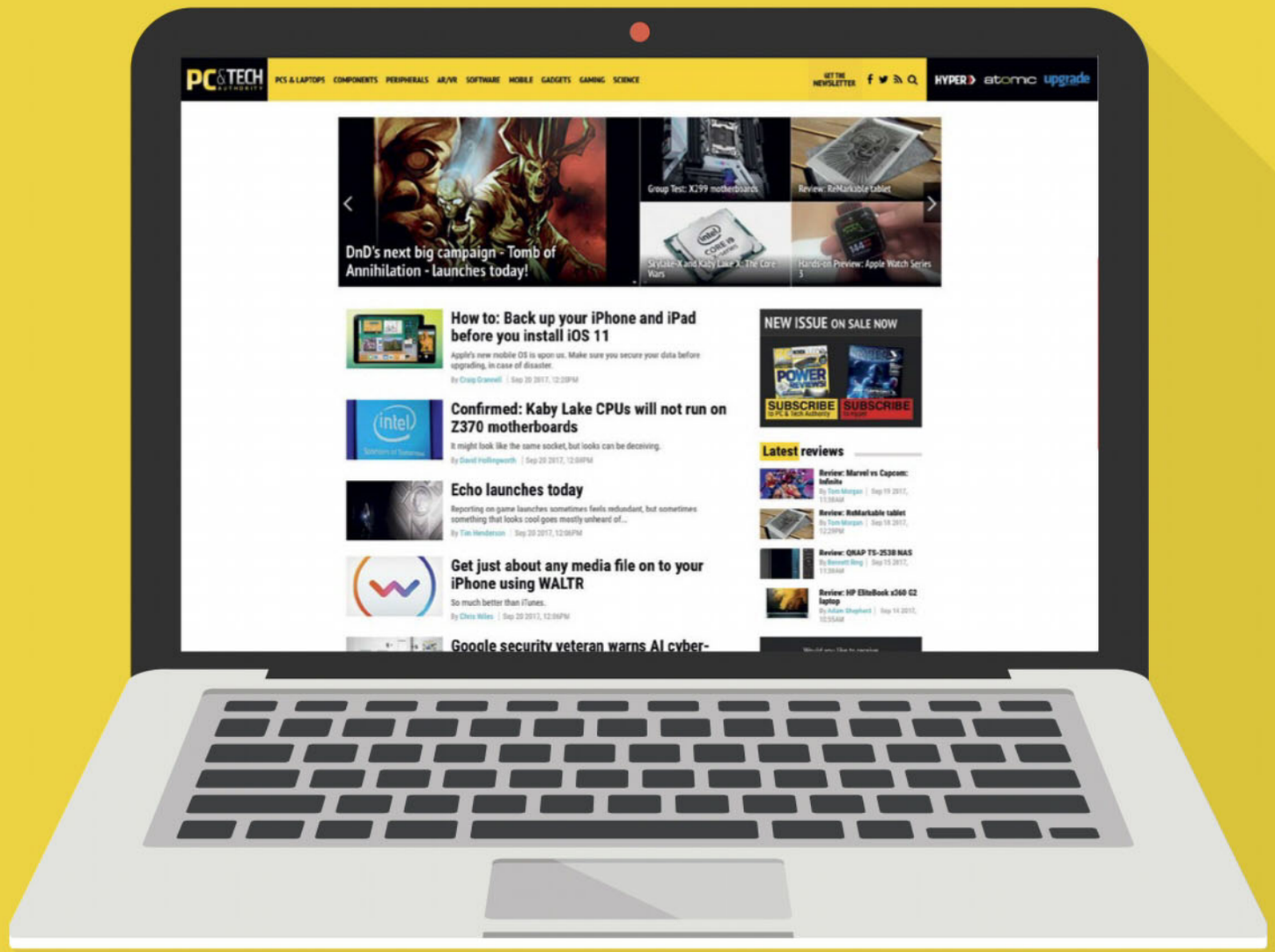
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GPU
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MEMORY
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STORAGE
Samsung SSD M.2 2280 NVMe 250G 960 EVO + 2TB HDD (any)
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fractal-design.com

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Silverstone.com

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KEYBOARD
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www.roccat.org

MOUSE
Roccat Kone EMP
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Asrock B250 Gaming K4 Motherboard
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asrock.com.au

GPU
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$429
msi.com

MEMORY
G.Skill Ripjaws 4 DDR4 2400MHz 16GB Kit 2x 8GB
$188 *gskill.com*

STORAGE
2TB HDD (any)
$50 *www.staticice.com.au*

CASE
Corsair Carbide SPEC-02 Mid Tower Gaming Case
$80 *corsair.com/en-au*

PSU
SilverStone Strider Essential 500W ST50F-ESB $55
silverstone.com

SOUND
Cougar Immersa
$59
cougargaming.com

DISPLAY
AOC e2470Swh
$158
aocmonitorap.com/anz

KEYBOARD
Tesoro Tizona G2N
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tesorotec.com

MOUSE
Cooler Master MM530
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coolermaster.com

TOTAL: **$1,526**

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asus.com.au

MEMORY
G.Skill RIPJAWS 4 32GB KIT 4X8GB
$229
gskill.com

STORAGE
2TB HDD (any) + SAMSUNG 500GB M.2 NVMe SSD 960 EVO
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CASE
Thermaltake View 71 Tempered Glass Edition
$219
www.thermaltake.com.au

PSU
Be Quiet! Dark Power Pro 11 850W Power Supply
$279
bequiet.com

SOUND
Sennheiser PC 373D
$329
en-au.sennheiser.com

DISPLAY
Acer Predator XB271HU
$899
acerstore.com.au

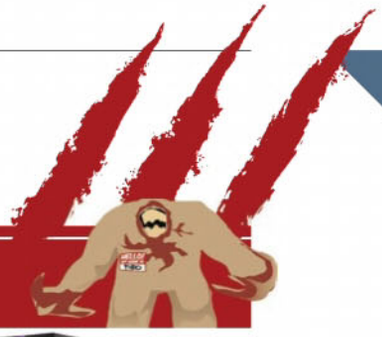
KEYBOARD
HyperX Alloy Elite
$149
www.hyperxgaming.com

MOUSE
Corsair Glaive
$99
www.corsair.com

TOTAL: $4,249

THE BEAST

When overkill is barely enough...



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$1530 + $145
intel.com

MOBO
MSI X299 Carbon Pro Gaming AC
$559
msi.com

VIDEO
MSI Lightning GeForce GTX1080 Ti
$1459
msi.com.au

MEMORY
2 x 16GB Corsair Vengeance LPX DDR4 3000
$459
corsair.com/en-au

STORAGE
Samsung 960 Pro 2TB + Seagate Barracuda Pro 10TB
$1589 + $599
samsung.com/au

CASE
CoolerMaster Cosmos II 25th Anniversary Edition
$449
coolermaster.com

PSU
Corsair RM1000i Special Edition
$279
corsair.com/en-au

SOUND
Astro A50
$399
www.astrogaming.com

DISPLAY
Samsung 34" Curved Monitor Series 7
$1199
www.samsung.com

KEYBOARD
Corsair K95 Platinum RGB
$299
corsair.com/en-au/

MOUSE
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TOTAL: $9,060

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MA/PCD268

THREE GAME ENTER, ONE GAME LEAVE

These days, gamers choose their preferred multiplayer shooter based on, well, whether they like the game. But in the late 1990s, liking the game wasn't enough. You also had to be a crusader for the Engine!

QUAKE, UNREAL, DUKE NUKEM 3D

DEVELOPERS ID SOFTWARE, 3D REALMS, EPIC
PERSONALITIES JOHN CARMACK, KEN SILVERMAN, TIM SWEENEY
RELEASED 1996, 1998, 1996
NUTSHELL Doom showed us the future of PC gaming was the first-person shooter. But what would gamers support? A more impressive 2.5D engine with a fun game, a super-serious but bafflingly abstract tech demo, or a sprawling sci-fi epic (heh) with shiny floors?

For any gamer under the age of, say, 20, the idea that someone would choose which game to play, exclusively, based on the way the game was programmed, might seem kind of bizarre. Who cares about the underlying engine? Every game looks pretty much as good as every other, right?

Of course, the late 1990s was the Hagionaut's golden age – where the vision and imagination of developers far exceeded PC hardware's ability to actually run their games.

Innovation wasn't about gameplay, or if it was, that gameplay was secondary. Innovation was all about graphics.

As discussed on an earlier Hagionaut trip, id Software changed PC gaming with Wolfenstein 3D, then changed it again with DOOM. And while Doom's 2.5D engine was awesome (especially the lighting), what really established id as the dev to beat was Deathmatch.

That no-holds-barred, grab-the-guns anarchic gameplay where you and three friends jumped into familiar levels and murdered each other over and over… today it seems no more radical than tip or hide-and-seek, but Deathmatch (a term coined by John Romero) has become the fundamental "play space" philosophy of all FPS multiplayer since.

After Doom, developers could barely keep up with gamer demand for more and crazier ways to eviscerate their friends. But what to do? Smash out a thousand Doom clones for quick cash? Or take the time to develop something truly next level, a true 3D space? Not 2.5D, where players ran around sandwiched between two flat horizontal surfaces, with floor and ceiling levels changed between "sectors" to give an illusion of complex geometry.

No, what we really wanted was true geometry, the ability to run around inside arbitrary polygons. Cathedral ceilings, I'm saying. Caves. Wild nightmare castles! Abstract shapes and grey/green textures everywhere!

Wait, what? Yes, this is what id Software decided we wanted after Doom. Quake dropped in 1996 and crippled 486s even as it blew minds. The nailgun's nails were actual 3D objects! You could enable mouselook and shoot your buddies from the mezzanine! Idiots! Quad damage gave you… uh… [counts on fingers] FOUR TIMES the damage!

While this was going on, the slightly sticky pop culture fanatics over a 3D Realms took a different tack. Once considered a rival to John Carmack, voxel-enthusiast Ken Silverman was pushing the 2.5D binary space partition type engine to absolute breaking point.

Duke Nukem 3D was loud, dumb, and incredibly fun. So what if it didn't have "true" 3D? You could shrink your buddies with a shrink ray! There was porno showing in the theatre level! Haha! No seriously, what D3D lacked in engine smarts, it made up for in heart. Of course, as we know, 3D Realms would then piss all that goodwill and player support away over the next 15 goddamn years, but that's another story…

There really was a "Quake vs Duke3D" social rivalry though. Duke fans found Quake grey and boring but Quake fans knew the real truth: compared to Duke, Deathmatch in Quake was on another level. Mouselook plus 800x600 OpenGL support plus levels actually designed specifically for Deathmatch (instead of just running through the too-large singleplayer maps), made a game that was faster, furiouseerouserer, and much more demanding of a player's skill.

Also, you could get slaughtered by a Low Ping Bastard, and for Duke3D players, that sucked. See, Quake changed the paradigm in more ways than one. Rather than every participant swapping data about the position of other players more or less equally, Quake was an early pioneer of the now standard server-client model.

One player would run the game as a server, and everything in the Deathmatch on THEIR PC would happen instantly. Opponents had to wait for the twine-and-bailing-wire Internet of 1996 to send the data to their PC and then send their data back to the server. Lag, on 14400 baud modems especially, was measured in the many hundreds of milliseconds.

And then along came the LPBs. The Low Ping Bastards were usually university students living on campus with access to rare ISDN uplinks (remember those?). Hell, in 1998 Wollongong uni had a 12Mbs microwave link between one college and the uni's gateway. Those LPBs had pings as low as 80, 90 millisecond. BASTARDS.

So the Quake vs Duke3D war raged on, kind of like Sydney vs Melbourne in that Melbourne (Duke3D) constantly goes on about Sydney (Quake) and every now and then Sydney sits up from its beach towel and says "What? Melbourne? Oh yeah, I'm glad I don't live there!" And then goes in for another swim.

Finally though, a real contender arrived. While Quake was out in the world getting modded (badly) and Jon Carmack was adding better coloured lights and a worse story to Quake 2, a young developer named Tim Sweeney was hard at work on a 3D engine that was all about giving game developers something Quake had forgotten – the ability to tell a cool story.

▲ **Quake comes from a time in gaming that we call the 'brown age'.**

Duke Nukem 3D actually wasn't entirely actually 3D. Still good but.

Unreal's Flak gun enabled gamers that sucked to still rack up a few lucky kills.

> Duke Nukem 3D was loud, dumb, and incredibly fun.

Unreal dropped in 1998, and it gave us our first look at what the future was going to be. In Unreal, the floors were shiny. Lights flickered. There were scripted events – enter a room, all the lights snapped off, then light back up one by one until a hideous monster jumped out at the player…

Of course, the fact that I've forgotten the name of the monster or any of the story details of Unreal, but I can still remember the last level of Quake's shareware episode is called House of Chthon, says something about how GOOD Unreal was, as a game.

No, what Unreal did was give other developers a set of tools that enabled them to tell amazing FPS stories. Those tools got better and better over the next 20 years.

And now here we are. PUBG runs on the Unreal 4 Engine. So does Ark, Rime, Gears of War 4 of course, and even indies like The Flame in the Flood.

Who did you back in the 90s? If it was Quake, you had a great time for the next 10 years. If it was Unreal, you were a shrewd prognosticator. If it was Duke… you might need to reassess your life choices… PC

THANKS HARVEY

Videogaming, too, has a sexual assault problem. **Daniel Wilks** wants us to do better

The Harvey Weinstein scandal and its fallout appear to have had a ripple effect across the entire entertainment industry. What started with more and more actors, both male and female, overcoming the stigma and telling their stories of groping, shaming, exhibition and other forms of sexual abuse has seemingly spread to other entertainment industries, and for the first time in a long while it appears as though people are listening and doing something about the problem. On social media, #metoo, a hashtag attached to stories of sexual assault or rape has become disturbingly ubiquitous. With the exception of some incel creeps who have co-opted the hashtag to talk about how women not having sex with them is sexual abuse, and some MRAs who have equated sexual assault with circumcision and the usual mob who cry that men get sexually assaulted too (ignoring the fact that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual assault against any gender are male and that the overwhelming majority of victims are female), it appears that the vast majority of people are doing something unexpected – believing women.

On October 23, NeoGAF, the largest gaming forum around went dark after it came to light that the founder and owner of the site had been accused of sexual misconduct. The day before more than half of the moderators of the site quit and thread upon thread featured users asking to be banned from the forums. Tyler Malka, the owner and founder of NeoGAF, known as "EviLore" on the forums was no stranger to accusations of sexual misconduct before the most recent claim, having had a number levelled at him over the years, but the widening acceptance that seems to have been brought on by the Weinstein scandal appears to have made the latest stick. The fact that NeoGAF is down and may be lost for good is not something to celebrate, but the fact that long-term members of the forum, a place not known to be the most welcoming, asked for permabans and fled the site is. It appears to be, if not a maturation of the gaming community, then at least an acknowledgement that there are some things that cannot be countenanced. When the site came back up a few days later, long time forumers revolted and left in droves, both due to the initial complaint as well as the ham-handed manner in which EviLore responded to the accusation with a mixture of indignation and gas lighting.

The fact that many of the admins at first thought that the accusation may have been a false flag operation carried out by remnants of GamerGate is also telling. Since the early days of the GamerGate movement, NeoGAF was an outspoken opponent of the Gaters, espousing and also standing up for what have been labelled "progressive" causes, and the two groups have frequently been at loggerheads. Given that GamerGate has a history of both sexual discrimination and false sexual claims about people (see the whole Zoe Quinn story) it's easy to see how the assumption of a false flag could be reached. Of course, the fact that it wasn't the first time Malka had been accused of sexual wrongdoing should have been something of a giveaway.

▲ **Malka's pathetic response has been to delete threads and ban "politics" on NeoGAF.**

> "the vast majority of people are doing something unexpected - believing women"

It's not just videogaming that is showing this problem with a culture of both sexual assault and the unwillingness of a group to notice the rot at its core. The roleplaying scene has been impacted by the Weinstein fallout as well, with women and men coming out to tell of sexual assault and harassment within the community, and the fact that the behaviour of some members of the community has been an open secret for years. Somebody will probably call what I'm writing white knighting or another of those associated bullshit names that gets levelled at anyone who speaks out about the treatment of women. Obviously that is not the case. This is, in my own way, a call for us, myself included, to do better. It's not just a matter of calling out predators. We, as a whole, no matter what community you see yourself a part of, need to police ourselves. We can't have open secrets. We can't have people's actions being excused because they "aren't usually like that." We all have to do better to make gaming a better place for everyone.

Next month I'll hopefully find something a little more mainstream games to get angry and rant about. I don't want anyone accusing me of being an SJW or some other pathetic supposed insult. I don't want them to do it not for my sake but for theirs – the first person that labels me an SJW gets a kick right in the bathing suit area. PC

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